クロスカディア ①

月メグル地ノ来訪者タチ

神坂 一

イラスト 谷口ヨシタカ

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Crosscadia Vol.1

Visitors to the Moon-Circle Land

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Machine Translated and Edited by Eff_Efferson (March 2026)

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Moon on My Back, the Demon Descends

Father wasn't moving. Mother wasn't moving. He knew what had happened. Before his motionless parents stood several shadows. Every one of them was — watching. Staring. At him.
"— What do we do?" One of the shadows spoke. Still staring at him. A dangerous light gleamed in its eyes. Its mouth moved again — "There is no need to — eliminate him."
Slightly ahead of the others. That was a different shadow speaking. "How magnanimous of you. However, I cannot agree to leaving this one be." "An appropriate punishment is what is fitting. That is all I am saying." A calm reply to another shadow's mockery.
"An appropriate punishment? Such as?"
"For example — let's see, how about this?"
The shadow spoke and began to chant a curse. The words it wove caused the world to entangle, and the laws of causality to collapse.
"Oh." The voice of another shadow.
"I see. Fitting, is it."
"How generous."
"No. If anything, how cruel."
The other shadows began to add their curses on top.
Dokun.
Something felt wrong. The flesh throbbed. Every muscle in the body grew hot, and the core of the body turned cold. The overlapping curses warped the world. A haze settled over the mind.
— What did you do? —

The question never became a voice. Reaching out toward the shadows —
What was seen —

That day, Shin was in a bad mood.
The cause was a pointless argument with a friend.
He was staring out the window, ruminating on his anger, when —

Hamuguu!
A strange groan came from right beside him.
Shin turned his gaze that way —
All he could do was freeze.
It was an afternoon still too early to call evening.
Along the dusty main street people came and went, and here and there one could spot horse-drawn carriages and the recently popularized spell-driven automobiles.
The interior of the shop was drowsy in the afternoon light, with only a scattering of customers.
A small wooden table that felt more dingy than chic. The seat across from him — which had been empty — now held a figure.
A girl.
About five years younger than Shin, by the looks of it. Thirteen or fourteen. Her short-trimmed red hair suited her well.
She wore a casual outfit of an inexpensive shirt and trousers. And perched on her right shoulder — a single white kitten. It was a wonder the shop staff had even let her in.
The girl clutched her chest, writhing in a motion that was somehow comical, while the kitten on her shoulder clung on desperately to avoid being thrown off.
Of course —
She was no one Shin recognized.
"……"
He watched the girl's amusing dance in silence for a while — and in the meantime, Shin had noticed another change.
On the plate on the table sat the sandwich he had ordered, nearly untouched — or so it should have been.
Less than half of it remained.
He looked back and forth between the plate and the girl, who was still squirming, for a moment —
…I see…
He somehow understood.
She had wolfed it down and choked on it.
"So? What do you think you're doing?"
Bikuu!
At Shin's voice — quiet, but carrying — the girl's body gave a small start —
"……nku……! Puuuuuuuu……"
Startled, the blockage in her throat apparently came free, and she let out a large breath. She slumped back heavily into the chair across from him, catching her breath —
Their eyes met.

How did Shin appear to the girl's eyes?
Tall, with black hair. His features were refined enough to call feminine, but whether it was the lack of warmth or his somewhat sharp gaze, he was met with rave reviews from those around him: "Having him silently standing nearby is scary," "He gives off some kind of pressure," "Who do you think you're glaring at." That sort of thing.
Still, perhaps because sitting down cut that oppressiveness in half, there was no sign of unease in the eyes looking back at him.
"So?"
Shin slowly pointed at the plate — at the sandwich that had lost half its contents —
"I'll ask one more time. What are you doing?"
"What… you mean…"
The girl blinked once. The white kitten perched neatly on her shoulder also blinked once.
As if to say: why would Shin even be asking that question?
She calmly reached out, bit into another piece of sandwich — swallowed, and said:
"Stealing food."
Without the slightest hesitation.
At that moment.
Shin felt a strange sort of indifference come over him.
He looked out the window and waved his hand dismissively.
"…Do as you like. If you want to eat, eat.
But take it to another table.
Take that and go somewhere else."
He had no appetite now anyway. If it was just going to go to waste, he might as well give it to this stranger, whoever she was.
In any case, he just wanted to shoo her away and be done with it —
"Ehhhhhhhh!?"
But the voice the girl let out held surprise — and for some reason, dissatisfaction.
She scowled openly and leaned forward.
"Wait a minute! What kind of reaction is that!? That means this counts as you treating me — meaning it's not stealing at all!"
"That's fine, isn't it."
Shin said dismissively, and the girl pointed at herself:
"It is not fine!
Because, look, I'm a villain."
"— Ah. I see."
Shin finally understood.
Not that she was a villain — no, it was more that — well — in a word —
"Must be a change of seasons."

He muttered it, but she caught it and raised her eyebrows slightly.
"How rude! That makes it sound like I'm some kind of strange person!"
That had been his intent, but he had absolutely no interest in engaging in a comedy routine with a strange stranger he'd never met.
He stayed silent, and the girl went on glaring at him.
"Look. In other words. What I want is something more like — you know — screaming in unbearable frustration, crying tears of blood, collapsing and pointing at me and calling me a criminal — that kind of reaction."
"I don't know anything about that."
He said flatly.
He had no intention of being the kind of small-scale person who cried tears of blood over a stolen sandwich.
"Ah. You just brushed right past it.
You really have no sense of fun, do you — ...well, even if I say that, you're not going to give me the reaction I want anyway, and if at this point you did it out of obligation that would just make me angrier anyway...
Ah! Oh right! I know what to do!"
She clapped her hands and pointed at Shin.
"I'll make you my underling number two. Then it's fine if you mooch off me for food! No objections or problems with that, right!"
"Number two?"
Shin asked, and she said:
"Yep. I'm Mei. And this one —"
She indicated the kitten on her shoulder with her eyes.
"Had a fateful encounter with me on the roadside just yesterday. I've named her Ruxenol."
"So I rank below a cat."
"Well, depending on your future performance, a promotion is possible!
So do your best."
"....."
He had no intention of becoming anyone's underling, of course, but Shin fell silent for now and turned his gaze back out the window.
Somewhat belatedly, he had finally realized.
With this type of person, ignoring them was the only way.
And so he missed it.
— Pikun! —
The sudden jerk of the kitten's head on the girl's shoulder. Its sharp gaze sent into empty space —
"And so, first order for underling number two ~"

Whether or not she noticed the cat's behavior, the girl — Mei — spoke in a languid tone.
"Dodge."
Just that.
Before Shin even understood what she meant.
The world — cracked open.

When he came to.
What lay before him — part of the shop — had been pulverized.
Along with the seat he had been sitting in just moments before.
Not destroyed.
The wooden window. The floor. The brick wall. The table. The chairs. Everything had turned into gray fragments and they were scattered everywhere.
Shin was sitting on the floor of the shop, dazedly taking in the scene.
His memory had blanked out for an instant. Had he instinctively dodged? Had someone pushed him? Or had the blast's force sent him flying? He didn't remember clearly.
The lingering shockwave still reverberated through his body.
He only now realized it had been a tremendous sound.
The scene before him had a certain familiarity.
He remembered — it was from the military exercise demonstration at the training school. A tank struck by a spell-formula launched by a special operations soldier, which had crumbled apart effortlessly. A weapon of steel that had collapsed into gray fragments as if converted into a completely different substance.
The rubble before him — too far gone to even call rubble — was remarkably similar to that.

Spell-formulas.
A technique that connects this world to a different world, introduces and mingles different physical laws, causes the laws of causality to collapse, and triggers some kind of phenomenon.
Shin knew well enough that they were used in daily life in various ways, and the basic theory was covered in school.
But having a destructive spell-formula detonate right before his eyes —
"— What the hell was that!?"
"What happened?"
"A customer!? This is..."
Various voices overlapped, from inside and outside the shop.
Among the gathering crowd, the figure of the girl — Mei — was already gone.
".....Who knows....."
He muttered, and looked up at the early evening sky. Two moons floated there, casually, ahead of their time.

That night.
If anyone had been watching the starry sky, they might have seen the shadow of great beating wings against the backdrop of the moon.
Three moons stood at mid-heaven.
Of the five moons, one had already set, and one had just begun to rise.
The wings cut through the night air, pressing onward through the void.
From the shadow's eyes that could see through darkness, the city of Burgess spread out in a full panorama below.
Streets lined with lampposts. The port facing a large lake, and the river that split the city in two were faintly wrapped in mist. At the center of the city, on a hill, stood the Lord Mayor's official residence, and a short distance from there the recently built transcontinental railway station could be seen.
The shadows were not only in the sky.
Racing through the shadows of buildings, rushing through gutters on the ground — those were numerous small shadows of a different kind from the one in the sky.
Before long, one of the small shadows racing across the ground sniffed at the night wind with its protruding nose —
— Gee! —
One cry, and it shook the night air.
At the signal that rang out, the shadow in the sky wheeled its wings in the darkness and floated softly down to earth.

A spot slightly off from the center of the city, at the edge of a residential area.
At this hour there were no pedestrians, and almost no light leaked from the windows.
Only the faint glow of the street lamps — and the light of the stars that colored the night sky — dimly outlined the shape of the shadow that had descended.
Around it, presences gathered one by one. The presences of countless small shadows.
The winged shadow turned its head —
"— A smell — there is a smell —"
What leaked out was the word of a human. A hoarse, leaking voice.
A smell that no human could detect. Perhaps it would be more accurate to call it the residue of a presence than a smell.
The shadow turned on its heel in search of its source. It moved through the sleeping streets, turning its head left and right, crossing a lawn —
And finally stopped its feet near the hedge of a certain house.
Slowly, it lowered its gaze.
What was there —
Nyau.
A single white kitten.
"— I see —"
The shadow gently reached out its hand.
"You were together with it today at noon. That is how the smell transferred to you."
Stroked, the kitten purred.
"Or perhaps the smell was deliberately transferred to you.
Either way, it is no longer nearby.
Let us go. Jubias."
— Roar —
The wind cried.
When the wind the wings had created settled, the shadow's wings were already in the sky, and the small shadows racing across the ground had also vanished from the spot.
Nyau.
In what remained, only a single pure-white kitten remained alone in the dark.

"Hey. I heard yesterday was rough."
"Not really."
He was spoken to, but Shin answered immediately while looking in a completely different direction.
Burgess City Training School.
What he could see from the window seat of the classroom was the familiar scenery. The school courtyard at lunch break, exactly as usual.

There were many students out there, quite a few girls among them, but that it all looked so utterly cheerless was surely entirely the fault of these depressingly gloomy uniforms.
A black stand-collar jacket with black trousers, a white collar peeking out beneath the neck. A somewhat short white coat worn over the top. Men and women alike wore the same clothes.
Even the noise of the students carried on the breeze sounded somehow lifeless — probably just Shin's imagination, though.
The voice at his side continued:
"'Not really,' nothing. I heard all about it.
Apparently after that, someone fired a spell-formula right in front of you."
"Where'd you hear something like that?"
"Word gets around. That place is near my house, for one thing."
That was true enough.
Suppressing a sigh, he turned — and met a pair of curious, rubbernecking eyes.
The same uniform as Shin and the other students, of course. But somehow it didn't look so gloomy — perhaps because of his honey-colored hair. Or perhaps because of the good-natured smile on his face, which was not exactly handsome but had a likeable charm.
"— So? What happened?"
He — Mark Forliver — asked, voice filled with curiosity and expectation.
For Shin, he was a classmate who could be called a friend. And the opponent in yesterday's quarrel.
Though for his part, Mark seemed to have already forgotten about the trivial little spat in the face of his interest in the incident.
Well, that was both his best quality and the reason he was such a loudmouth.
Yesterday after school. Shin had gone into that shop with him — and in the middle of chatting they'd gotten into some stupid argument about something trivial, and Mark had walked out.
After that, Shin had had his encounter with the girl and the incident.
An offensive spell-formula had been used in the city. A student in training school uniform had been present. A rumor at that level would have spread through the neighborhood immediately.
And if it was Mark, it wouldn't be hard for him to guess from the circumstances that the uniformed student had been Shin.
"Honestly, I don't really understand it."
Deciding to drop the trivial lingering resentment, Shin turned to face him and sat properly.
"I told the patrol squad too...

I was in the shop, and some woman I didn't know started talking to me. Before I knew it, a spell-formula had gone off right in front of me.
That's the summary. Though even if I told you more detail, it'd come out about the same."
"Huh? What's that all about?"
Mark frowned.
But being asked that didn't help much.
"That's why I said, I don't know what was what either."
"Hmm..."
Mark thought about it for a bit.
"— And this woman you didn't know...
Was she cute? Was she cute?"
"That's your focus point. The important part."
"Of course it is."
When he answered without hesitation and with a perfectly straight face, Shin had no choice but to respond.
He recalled the girl — Mei's face.
"Let's see... in a few more years she'll probably be a beauty."
"A few more years... so she's still a kid?"
He seemed to have a preference for older women, and Mark said it with an obviously disappointed tone.
"Yeah. Thirteen or fourteen, I'd say.
But you know. It doesn't matter how old or what she looked like, she was weird enough that none of that seemed to matter."
"Oh? Weird how?"
"...It's hard to explain in one word..."
Shin looked away and hedged.
He couldn't very well say "she called me her underling right off the bat."
If he told Mark that, he'd be laughed at and pointed at, and by the end of the school day that embarrassing little episode would without a doubt be all over the class.
He wasn't a bad guy, but he wasn't a deeply thoughtful one either. That was the kind of person Mark was.
"She was saying completely incoherent things."
"So meaning, that woman fired the spell-formula?"
"No... I don't think so.
She didn't seem to be carrying a spell ring to begin with."
"...I see."
Mark accepted the explanation.

To operate spell-formulas, one needed to wear a spell ring — a ring engraved with a pattern called a spell-rune.
By tracing it, and in some cases saying something like a keyword, a person could for the first time activate a spell-formula.
Its size was proportional to the scale of the spell being used. A spell small enough to light a cigarette could work with something ring-sized, but a spell capable of causing the destruction he'd seen yesterday would be impossible to conceal in anything of that size.
"So then, what about this?"
Mark raised one finger and lowered his voice.
"What if that woman is some kind of former princess of the disbanded royal family, out traveling incognito, and the attack was an assassin's spell aimed at her...!"
"Which piece of entertainment fiction is that from."
Shin muttered with exasperation.
And then —
"At the very least, she does not appear to be a simple 'Princess,' does she."
『!?』
At the sudden third voice cutting in, Shin and Mark involuntarily turned around —
And right before Shin's face, there were golden eyes.
This close, the vertically slit pupils were impossible to miss.
The hair was gold. This color was what one must mean when one spoke of truly golden hair. On a porcelain-perfect face floated a pleasant smile.
He was in the same class as Shin and Mark. He looked about the same age, though how much that could be trusted was another matter.
Because he was a foreign exchange student.
"F-Foreign exchange student!?"
Mark reared back and cried out, and the boy directed his manufactured smile at him.
"I would prefer to be called by my name. Lezerd.
Or does this country have a custom of referring to exchange students as 'exchange students?'"
It could only be heard as sarcasm, but perhaps he was actually asking sincerely.
He had only arrived recently. There were surely many aspects of local custom he hadn't yet grown accustomed to.
"...No... I just couldn't get your name out fast enough.
What's up? You're also interested in yesterday's incident?"
"Very much so."
Lezerd answered Mark, and smoothly shifted his gaze to Shin, asking:
"What did you encounter?"
"Huh?"

Not understanding the meaning of what was being asked, he responded with a question.
"In other words.
I'm asking what your encountered 'Princess' was."
"...I don't follow the question."
Lezerd thought for a moment.
"Simply put — there is a smell."
"A smell?"
Shin's expression sharpened slightly. In Lezerd's homeland perhaps it was different, but at least here, being told something "smells" or "is smelly" was nothing but an insult.

But Lezerd quietly nodded.
"I believe it is the 'Princess's' smell.
A smell only I can detect.
— No, that's wrong. A smell you two cannot detect. Whether 'smell' is the right word, I don't know."
"Still don't understand it."
"I see..."
Lezerd thought for a moment.
"— Anyway, please be careful.
It is not a very pleasant smell."
With that, he turned on his heel and walked away.
A brief silence. A moment passed.
"...What was that?"
Mark's murmur.
"Beats me."
Shin gave a small shrug at his friend's words.

"We call ourselves the darkness, some say."
The shadow leaked out a quiet voice.
"But that is nothing more than prejudice. Fear of those with power, unease born of ignorance."
The white elegant building atop a small hill was listed among the city's landmarks.
A dazzling white standing in sunlight, glimpsed between verdant trees. Exactly the sort of place perfect for a family picnic.
— Were it not for the fact that it was the Lord Mayor's official residence.
However splendidly it gleamed from outside, within the walls there were shadows.

The newly appointed Lord Mayor — appointed by the Central Council only a year ago — sat in his curtain-drawn office, speaking with a certain visitor.
The visitor spoke. Back to the curtains. A shadow itself.
"Among us too there is discernment and discipline. Some observe it; some violate it. In other words, we are the same as you."
"— The same — are we —"
The Lord Mayor's murmur was stiff.
The same, nonsense.
The Lord Mayor, still in his mid-thirties, had never witnessed the powers of their kind.
But if his knowledge was accurate, the person before him could, if they chose, easily twist off his head and escape past any guards in the residence.
"— Quite so. Indeed, the strength we hold for fighting is far too different."
As if reading the Lord Mayor's thoughts, the visitor continued.
"That is what is at issue.
Among our people, there was one who broke discipline. That one is now hiding in this town.
If this were left to you, the damage would be immense. And that would only breed more unnecessary resentment.
To prevent such a situation, we will settle our own mess ourselves.
All you need do is extend us certain conveniences."
"...I see..."
A single bead of sweat slid down the Lord Mayor's thin chin.
In other words — he was being told to cover up a certain disturbance.
And for all he knew, there could be all manner of hidden motives as well.
Had the visitor not carried a letter of introduction from a Central Council member — and had they been an ordinary human — he would have sent them packing with a sharp rebuke.
But that was not possible.
"If those are the circumstances I will cooperate... however, there are limits to everything.
If the scale of what you consider within limits exceeds what we are capable of handling, things will become somewhat complicated."
"I understand. Either way, a certain amount of preparation will be necessary."
The visitor lifted the small trunk case they had set at their feet and opened the lid on the Lord Mayor's desk.
"— This is...!"
The Lord Mayor's voice was hoarse, and not only from awe.
Neatly lined up inside the case — coins.
The rainbow-silver gleam of orichalcum coins — currency no longer in use.

This many, even if sold off cheap, would be enough to pay hush money to every patrol member in the city and still leave enough to live comfortably on.
And yet that meant, in other words, that there was the risk of trouble proportional to that sum.
Still, there was no way to refuse something like this.
"...However, finding just one person in this vast city is a laborious task, is it not?
If you like, I can lend you the strength of the patrol squad?"
If they could keep their hand on the controls, managing events would become easier — or so he hoped.
But the visitor quietly shook its head.
"There is no need for that.
A smell. There is a smell, you see."
"...Pardon?"
The Lord Mayor asked back, and the visitor, holding the Lord Mayor's gaze, said:
"A smell you humans cannot detect.
...Though whether 'smell' is the right expression, I do not know.
Either way, leave everything to us.
That is all."
Before that unwavering tone, all an inexperienced Lord Mayor could do was silently nod.

The age when night meant darkness is over.
He recalled someone somewhere saying that.
But it is a lie.
Shin thinks.
True, in the present —
In small villages perhaps it was different, but here, in a large city like Burgess, streets were lined with gas lamps, and every evening patrol officers would make their rounds lighting them.
The flame wasn't particularly bright, but it lit the nighttime streets just enough to walk by, and unlike the moon and stars, it wouldn't be hidden by the whims of clouds.
Darkness had grown much thinner compared to the past. That was likely true.
But there were still places the light couldn't reach, and crime that lurked in the dark was hardly going to vanish from the world.
"Listen up!
Even if you spot a suspicious individual, don't you dare think you'll just go ahead and catch them yourself!
Follow orders, call for backup!

Understood, you greenhorns!"
『Yes sir!』
At the squad leader's words, the lined-up students from the training school answered in unison.
Among those students, Shin was mixed in.
— A great war ended fifty years ago.
Arms reduction for inter-nation friendship.
Under that banner, the military was divided into an army and a patrol squad to maintain public order, and the military academy had its name changed to the Training School.
Shin was still a child when that happened.
The age when soldiers were heroes was over.
Shin had enrolled in the training school simply because the tuition was cheap and he didn't need to worry about employment after graduation.
After graduation, students would join either the army or the patrol squad.
This practical field training was said to be an essential subject to gauge suitability for that.

Once a month, on a weekend night, a student from the training school and a career patrol officer were paired up to carry out nighttime patrol duties.
In the training school uniform, wearing the patrol squad's tall cap, with a single slender sword at the hip.
— Though, the rapier issued to trainees had its edge blunted to prevent accidents, making it unable to cut. More like a thin iron rod... or rather, it might be more accurate to call it a slightly fancy piece of wire — in short, just for show — just for appearances, really.
Training consisted of going around the assigned course, and if nothing happened, that was that.
Even so, on a weekend night, small incidents like mediating drunken brawls did come up fairly regularly.
— On this particular day, the officer who became Shin's partner was a tired-faced man in his early thirties.
Without much of a conversation, the two walked through the night city.
Perhaps because a river flowed nearby — a night fog had begun to rise around them.
The assigned patrol course was away from the bustling entertainment district. He didn't know what the buildings were, but it was a dull scene of nothing but brick walls continuing on and on. Between the hour and the night fog, there was absolutely no foot traffic.
"...Let's get this over with and go home for a drink."

The officer said. Not to Shin, more like to himself.
Shin felt the same — wanting to finish and go home. The two hurried along the street —
...tahi taHiTa hita hita...
"—?"
Shin's ears caught that footstep when the two had come about halfway through the patrol course, somewhere around a quiet residential apartment area.
He unconsciously stopped walking and looked around.
The lane lit by the faint glow of a street lamp.
In the depths blurred with fog and darkness, what he glimpsed for a moment — a shadow —
"— Hey! What are you doing, kid!"
The irritated voice that rang out was the officer's beside him.
"There was something over there just now."
"Huh?"
He came back and approached Shin, took a brief glance down the lane, and said:
"Nothing there."
"There was, just now."
"What was?"
"...I don't know... about the size of a dog..."
"Then it's a dog. Don't worry about it."
"It wasn't."
Shin denied the officer's words.
The size had indeed been about that of a medium-sized dog, but —
"The shape was completely different. That was not a dog."
"Look here. Kid."
The officer said with an irritated tone.
"Don't tell me you're on something weird, are you?
Or what, you're so nervous you're seeing things?
Some dog probably just looked strange because of the fog or the light.
It's a dog. A dog. Understood? Let's go."
He wasn't even trying to hide his annoyance.
— Well, maybe the officer was right.
That would be the more natural explanation — and above all, it meant they could go home sooner.
But —
It was bothering him.
That was definitely not a dog.
And more than anything, going along quietly here would feel like losing to this unmotivated officer, and that was somewhat irritating.

"I'll take a look."
"Hey, you there!"
He said it and turned on his heel, ignoring the officer's rebuke and heading into the depths of the lane.
What lay beyond was a park.
Trees were planted around it, stone benches lined up.
The light of a few scattered street lamps illuminated the shimmer of the drifting fog.
Moving shapes in the area — there were none.
He swept his gaze left and right —
Zat!
A shrub rustled.
A black shadow crossed his field of vision.
That was definitely — not a dog.
— What is that!?
He was already running before he'd thought it. Chasing the shadow that had passed.

It was fast. Dog-fast, in fact. The shadow quickly blurred and vanished into the fog.
Shin followed in the general direction, running, and —
He spotted a human figure ahead.
Two figures standing there. One small, one large.
He was still approaching when —
— Gee! —
An unearthly cry rang out far closer than expected.
He turned, and there — about the size of a dog — a creature that was neither insect nor beast.
Bat-like, pitch-black skin. A body that appeared twisted in unnatural ways. The sharp white fangs lined in its mouth told clearly that it was no safe creature.
He finally realized. The shadow the size of a dog was not just one.
In the shadows of the hedges. Under the street lamp. Beside the buildings. In tree branches. Along the road. At his very feet.
Dozens of them, all fixed on Shin, watching.
He wasn't opposed to animals, but — he honestly couldn't see himself making friends with these.
— This is bad...!
A chill ran down his spine.
He realized it now, belatedly. That he was standing in the middle of danger.
The shadow ahead — the larger one — was watching him.
No, the fog and darkness made it look like nothing but a shadow, but he could feel it.

It was probably the master of these small shadows. One command from it, and his fate —
The large shadow hesitated for a moment — and then stirred.
Something tensed in the darkness.
Shin understood.
The shadow had decided to eliminate him.
That was when —
"— Hey! Kid! Where'd you go!"
What came from far behind was the voice of the officer he'd left behind.
The tension that had filled the night air — vanished.
...Let's go. Jubias...
What reached him was, probably, the large shadow's voice.
At the same time the beasts around him bounded away.
The large shadow blurred and dissolved into the fog.
...I survived... I think...
Shin, for the first time, inwardly thanked that unenthusiastic patrol officer.
What remained was the small human figure that had been facing them.
"Oh. Surprisingly useful after all."
"...That voice...!?"
Shin couldn't help but cry out.
He recognized it. The strange girl he'd met yesterday. Wasn't her name Mei, or something?
"What was all that?"
"Don't know."
No sign of agitation in the answer.
"I mean, really—"
"— Are you there! Kid!"
The officer's voice cut in.
"Bye then. See you later."
At the sound of it, Mei said.
"Wait, hey!"
Before he could stop her, she said it and left, Mei's shadow melting into the darkness and fog.

— The scolding and lecture the officer delivered to Shin were long enough to more than cancel out the fact that he'd been saved.

Unlocking the door and stepping inside was darkness and silence.

There was no family voice to greet him here.
No. There was no such thing anywhere anymore.
By the time he could remember, his father was already gone, and his mother had left this world two years ago.
He wouldn't be lying to say it didn't bother him, but honestly — he had gotten used to it.
Fortunately, this house and enough assets to live on until graduating from the training school had remained.
He traced the spell ring at the side of the entryway with his finger and lit the ceiling light.
He let out a tired, deep sigh, and Shin headed toward the back room.
He was sleepy. Just sleepy.
The time was already close to dawn.
He should have been able to come home much earlier — but —
On the way back, at the end of a long lecture from the officer, what waited for Shin when he returned to the meeting point was an even longer stay-behind lecture from the squad leader.
Defying orders. Unauthorized abandonment of the scene. Individual selfish actions can sometimes endanger a larger entity called an organization, blah blah blah.
Of course Shin had explained the circumstances. Skipping most of it for brevity.
He'd seen some strange creature that wasn't a dog. Since it might be dangerous, he'd gone after it. That was all.
The squad leader's answer was the same as the officer's.
Namely: there's no way such a thing exists. Probably a misidentification.
— Come to think of it, even the officer he'd been paired with hadn't seen it. In terms of the situation, it wasn't unreasonable that he wasn't believed.
His brief explanation must have sounded to the squad leader's ears like a clumsy excuse.
The lecture dragged on further —
And so, the current hour. Here we are.
His stomach was empty too, but above all else, he needed to sleep.
Shin opened the bedroom door —
"……."
And froze in place right there.
In the bed with its sheets changed just yesterday — the girl, Mei, was sleeping comfortably, breathing peacefully, as if she owned the place.
How had she known which house was his?
How had she gotten in?
There were many things to ask, but what first occupied Shin's head in that moment was just one thing.

— She's stolen my sleep from me —
He involuntarily stepped forward, and brought down a light chop on the head of the snoring Mei —
Bosu.
But the strike he'd swung down sank into a soft pillow.
He hadn't missed. It was just that at exactly that moment, Mei had rolled over in her sleep.
"……"
Shin froze again in place for a moment, then:
"…I lose."
Leaving behind an inexplicable line, he turned around.
Batan. The sound of the door closing.
— A moment later.
"……Hmph. Still not quite there, underling number two……"
The small murmur that echoed in the room was from Mei, who had been lying with her eyes closed.
A little sleepiness remained in it, but clearly:
"……You don't roll over at such a conveniently timed moment like that……"
"I thought so too."
Bikuu!
At the voice, Mei's body jumped.
Nervously opening her eyes and slowly turning her head —
There was Shin, standing before the door, arms folded.
"Muyu. I thought you'd left, but…"
"I had a feeling you were pretending to be asleep. So I pretended to leave. Doesn't matter what. Get out of there. That's my bed."
"……Hmph…… You got me……"
With a small smile, Mei graciously got down from the bed.
"I'll yield this to you. Then I'll take the living room sofa."
"Fine."
Shin nodded contentedly, then walked toward the bed again, grabbed Mei by the scruff of her neck as they passed, dragged her straight to the back door, tossed her out — poof — closed and locked the door.
"Right."
This time for certain.
He nodded from the bottom of his heart, went back to his room, and dove into the bed.
And then, to a comfortable —

"…There was something I should have asked yesterday…"

Around noon he woke up on the living room sofa.
Shin opened with that, right off the bat.
Directed at Mei, who was cheerfully eating bread and cheese she'd helped herself to from his stash across the sofa.
"Where did you get in from?"
He had definitely thrown her outside last night and then slept in his own bedroom.
And yet waking up this morning, here was this situation.
The only thing he could think was that after he'd fallen asleep she'd gotten in from somewhere and moved him here, but he had locked both the front door and the back door. Then how on earth…
"It's a Secret."
She said offhandedly, and tossed the last piece of cheese into her mouth.
"If I told you, you'd try to block that way in, wouldn't you?"
"Of course."
Shin said bluntly.
"So? Why did you come to my place?"
"Well. I didn't have anywhere else to go."

"Don't just make yourself at home at my place."
Shin groaned, pressing his fingers to his temple.
In other words… was this a runaway girl situation?
He fixed Mei with a sullen glare.
"…Listen. Answer me properly. Otherwise I'll contact the patrol squad."
"The guard?"
Mei sat on the sofa across from him, licking the bread crumbs off her thumb.
"Oh wow. You have a personal escort? How fancy. For a mere underling number two."
"My own… guard?"
Not understanding what Mei was saying, he frowned slightly.
But now that he thought about it, Mei's incomprehensible words and actions were nothing new. For now, he decided to stop paying attention to each one.
"…So. Anyway.
First, let me have your full name and address."
"…Hmm…"
Mei looked around for something to wipe her hands on, glancing about.
"That question is a little…"
She tried to wipe them on her trousers — and somehow managed to stop herself.
"— You can't answer — can you?"
Asked with a sarcastic tone, Mei nodded:
"Yeah.

Because I... don't remember anything more than ten days ago."
"Meaning your memory is poor."
"That's not it."
She puffed out her cheeks.
"Not poor memory — I mean I have no memory."
"Ah. Right. Amnesia. In that case, let's go see a doctor."
"Sure."
Mei nodded easily —
And this time, Shin froze.
He'd expected that if he said he'd take her to a doctor, she'd panic and tell him the truth, but...
He awkwardly looked up and stared directly at her.
"...Wait... you're fine with that? With me taking you to a doctor...?"
"Of course.
Being like this is inconvenient in all kinds of ways. If my memory could come back, that would be the best outcome.
Ah, but... money? I have none."
"...Seriously.....?"
"Yeah. None at all."
"No... not the money thing... really... the memory...?"
"I don't have any."
For some reason she puffed out her chest and declared.
"Somehow I found myself wandering near the edge of this city, and then I met Ruxenol, and a few days after that I met you."
"...Ruxe...?"
"Underling number one, I mean."
Come to think of it, she had been calling the white cat she'd had with her when they first met something like that.
"Speaking of which, I don't see it. Where did that cat go?"
"...Mmm... that's the thing..."
Mei scratched her head with a troubled look.
"When we met, that attack happened, right?
Apparently it got scared and ran away — and that was the last I saw of it."
"I see.
...Well, the cat is beside the point...
If you have no memory, why do you remember your own name? And you said you were a villain — what's your basis for that?"
"Just a feeling."
She returned an effortlessly unanswerable reply, and Shin's energy drained out.

No memory. But somehow remembers just that. Unanswerable invincible logic.
Of course, there was the possibility Mei was lying. Her easy acceptance of a doctor visit could also be seen as a way to add credibility to her lie.
— Come to think of it, even if he did take her to a doctor, could one really distinguish between "someone who has lost their memory" and "someone pretending to have lost their memory"?
And yet, having someone with such unclear circumstances squatting here was also a problem.
Shin thought for a moment —
"...Fine."
He murmured and stood from the sofa.
"Doctor?"
"No. First — breakfast... no, lunch.
The food you had stashed, you just ate."
An empty stomach meant his thoughts couldn't come together properly either. First things first — food.
"Hmm.
So, you go ahead then."
"You're coming too. Together."
"What? Why? We're not going to the doctor?"
"We might.
Either way, I can't leave you here alone. Who knows what would happen."
"Wow. No trust."
"You're a villain, aren't you."
Asked by Shin, Mei thought for a moment.
"...I suppose you're right. Makes sense.
Okay, let's go."
Urged by Mei — feeling something vaguely unsatisfying about this — Shin got himself ready to head out.

Suppose, for example, he said this to the patrol squad:
This person has settled into my house. No identity, no memory. Please do something.
The officer would probably answer:
Has she done you any harm? Or committed any crime? If neither, there's nothing we can do on our end.
Then suppose he said the same thing to a doctor.
The answer would probably be:
If you'd like, we can admit her, but you'd be covering her hospitalization fees?

.....
"...Hey. Why are you consulting a wall?"
"I'm not. Nothing like that."
Before he knew it he had stopped walking; he resumed and said flatly.
The holiday city was lively.
Burgess, located in the north of the continent, wasn't quite large enough to call a major city, but it was significant enough to have a Lord Mayor's official residence, and accordingly fairly sizable. All kinds of goods gathered there, and on holidays, people came from nearby towns and villages to shop as well.
The entertainment district — not so crowded that you couldn't move, but irritatingly busy with foot traffic all the same.
For now, it was food. Shin went into a somewhat empty shop at random, waited for the waitress, and:
"Toast and coffee."
He wasn't particularly picky about food, and placed an equally random order.
Mei picked up the menu across the table and:
"...Let me see... I'll have..."
"She'll just have water."
"Ugh. Harsh."
"Water. Only water."
Firmly ignoring Mei's protest, Shin stared down the waitress and said it word by word.
"...Y-yes, of course."
Intimidated, the waitress retreated.
"...Cheapskate..."
"Why should I be generous with you?
If you want me to treat you, at least give me answers I can accept to my questions."
"...Well... I keep telling you, I have no memory."
"...Right, we'll keep that as it is for now.
But you do have memories of recent events, right?
When we first met, was it you who fired the spell-formula? Last night, who did you meet, and what did you talk about? How did you know which house was mine? And how you got in... was a secret, right."
Having been rattled by the amnesia claim earlier and failed to ask, Shin fired all his questions at the girl at once.
Mei made a troubled expression, put her right index finger to her temple, and:
"You can't ask all that at once...
Fine, I'll answer in order, but how I knew which house was yours — smell."
"Smell?"
Shin frowned and asked back.

A strange sense of déjà vu. He felt like he'd been told something similar very recently.
"Yeah. Smell.
And next..."
"Wait a minute."

"Wait a minute."
He stopped her before she could breeze past it.
"That 'smell' — does it mean my, um... body odor?"
Even so, that sort of thing bothered him. He asked cautiously, and Mei thought again.
"...Hmm... it's not that sort of thing...
How to put it... residual trace of an existential-form pattern?"
"What is that."
"In other words — a smell."
Sonzai keitate pattern no zanryu konseki. It sounded impressively complicated, but given this was Mei, it could very well be made up entirely. If it wasn't, asking for details would surely yield nothing comprehensible.
"All right. Let's leave it at that.
So? Earlier, was it you who used an offensive spell-formula? ...Come to think of it, I thought you said you were attacked?"
"Yeah. I was attacked."
"By who?"
"The person I ran into last night."
The waitress brought the ordered coffee and toast. Shin waited until she had gone before —
"You were attacked... but why?"
"I have no idea."
Mei's answers were all uniformly brief and uniformly dubious.
"Then, who was it? They were accompanied by strange creatures."
"Ah. The Jubias."
A sound that rang familiar somehow.
"Jubias... they called themselves that? The other party?"
"Called themselves?"
Mei blinked, looking puzzled.
"What are you talking about? The Jubias are those little animal things."
"Oh, that."
Shin understood.
He thought he recalled the large shadow saying something like that.
But this sounded like something that should be reported to the patrol squad.
Someone was targeting Mei. Which meant being near her would drag him into it too.

Frankly, that was the last thing he needed.
He wanted to talk to the patrol squad and have them take Mei somehow — but how exactly should he explain?
Shin was mulling this over when —
"— Ohhh! I saw it, I saw it, I sure saw it!"
A flippant voice from nearby made him turn — and there stood his classmate Mark, grinning widely.
Not in uniform, just a casual shirt thrown over, the look of someone going for a short walk.
Well, Shin too was in similar clothes now.
Mark met the eyes of Shin and Mei, deepened his grin, and said, in a lowered voice:
"……kukukuku……
I saw it, saw it, sure saw it! You've got some nerve, Shin-dread-sensei! You go around acting like you have no interest in women, all hardcore, and secretly you've got a date with a cute little younger girl? Hey hey hey! You sly dog, you Loli Loli Sorcerer King! Right, I'll be the one to spread the word. This will put an end to the whispered Shin-kun Gay Suspicions among the girls! Bye!"
"Wait wait wait wait wait wait wait wait."
As soon as he said it he'd turned around and started to walk off; Shin grabbed him by the back and dragged him back.
"Mark, it's a misunderstanding. There's only you for me —
…You're not about to say that, right, Shin."
"I would not."
Shin glared at Mark for the disgusting unfunny joke, but the other wasn't scared or fazed, still grinning.
"So it's not a misunderstanding? Meaning it really is a Loli Loli date! You must have said something like 'let's watch tonight's lunar eclipse together' to lure her out, and then while looking at the moon you're going to say 'just as these two moons have become one, we too are fated to be one' and do all sorts of things, you criminal!?"
After long acquaintance, Shin knew. How to shut up an over-excited loudmouth.
Namely, a more shocking line that caught his interest.
"She was there when the spell-formula incident happened."
"—"
The effect was immediate. Mark's expression returned to serious.
He sat down beside Mei — not beside Shin — looked back and forth between the two, lowered his voice, and:
"— For real?"
"Yeah."
"What's the spell-formula incident?"

Mei asked Shin.
"When we first met, someone fired a spell-formula."
"Oh. That."
Mark swallowed audibly.
"Really!? And? And? What led to what and made all that happen and what led to what and made this happen now!? And what's your relationship!?"
"Calm down first."
"What's the relationship, I mean..."
Mei pointed at Shin across the table.
"This one is my underling."
"Unde……!"
Zazazazazazaza!
Mark leaped up from his seat and stepped back sharply, looking back and forth between Shin and Mei.
"……a... Queen-and-slave thing……?"
"It's not."
Shin said flatly.
"She's just unilaterally calling me her underling.
More importantly — the whispered 'Shin-kun Gay Suspicions' among the girls — what's that about."
"Huh? I never said anything like that, never said it."
"You said it."
"So anyway — what was really going on with that spell-formula thing?"
"……."
Mark trying to change the subject. Shin staring him down in silence.
But — pressing about some strange rumor here would probably just get Mark slipping and sliding evasively. That would just be a waste of time.
What came first now was doing something about Mei. Besides, there was the slim hope that Mark might come up with a good idea.
Shin indicated Mei with his eyes.
"Apparently this person is being targeted by someone, and that person used a spell-formula.
— or so it seems."
Mark sat back down next to Mei again, stared at her face carefully, and said:
"Huh. Why?"
"She says she has no memory."
"For real!?"
Surprised by Shin's words, Mark stared even more carefully at Mei. Unnerved, she drew back slightly.

"No memory from when!? What's it like!? Aren't you scared!? Of course you're scared. But then getting targeted by someone because of that — there must be some reason obviously but you don't remember it of course. But if you have anything that seems like a clue to your background... and also what the other person was... and by the way I still don't even know your na—"
Bissu.
Unable to take any more, Mei's chop landed square in the face, and Mark's mouth finally stopped.
Mark turned to Shin:
"She's got a pretty short fuse."
"I think she's quite an interesting person."
A different voice emerged.
『!?』
All three turned that way —
"Whoa, the exchange student again!"
The one who raised the exaggerated cry was, naturally, Mark.
In their line of sight, the gold-eyed young man stood with a smile. Even on a holiday he wore the training school uniform.
"It's Lezerd."
He said it pleasantly.
"...Well then, Lezerd-san, in your country is there some custom that requires you to appear without warning?"
"No. I made friendly sounds as I approached, didn't I?"
『.....』
Shin and Mark fell silent, not understanding what he meant, and Lezerd, looking slightly thoughtful:
"— Perhaps humans cannot hear that sound.
That one."
"Well I don't know what it is."
Running out of patience trying to keep up with Lezerd's pace, Shin dropped that line of conversation and said:
"Do you want something? If not, we're in the middle of a rather serious discussion."
"I do have business.
I smelled the smell, so I came to observe the 'Princess.'"
With that Lezerd leaned across Mark's knee, brought his face close, and stared carefully at Mei —
"....."
"....."
"....."

"....."
Bissu.
Unable to take any more, Mei's chop landed in his face, and Lezerd finally drew back.
"I see."
『What.'
Shin and Mark retorted simultaneously.
But Lezerd answered nothing, gave a satisfied nod, turned around, and walked out of the shop just like that.
The three stared after him, dumbfounded.
"...Like I said before, I think...
What is that?"
"Said the same thing before too — beats me."
Shin said offhandedly and shrugged.

Shin was in a bad mood.
He unlocked the front door, stepped inside, traced the spell ring near the entrance, and lit the light.
"Whoa! The light came on!"
The surprised voice behind Shin was — needless to say — Mei, who he'd failed to hand off to the patrol squad.
After parting with Mark, Shin had taken Mei to the patrol squad headquarters, the Central Police Station.
They knew Shin's face from several days earlier with the spell-formula incident. If he explained the circumstances, they would understand — or so he'd expected.
— Understood, I see —
After a long interrogation, the officer had said exactly that, just as Shin had hoped. And then.
— We'll strengthen patrols in your area starting tonight —
They had continued, shattering his hopes.
Not "we'll take the girl into our protection." Not even "we'll assign you a guard." Simply "strengthen patrols."
The officer had cited the absence of a precedent for protecting someone who had lost their memory, the possibility that since the reason for targeting her was unclear it may have just been a coincidence, manpower issues, and so forth — but —
Mei's testimony was suspicious.
That was probably the real reason she'd been handled so lightly.
Of course Shin had protested. He said he had no obligation to protect this woman.

The officer's answer was succinct. To wit: neither do we. End of discussion. And so it goes.
The patrol squad had been around for only a little over ten years. There were still various holes in the system, perhaps.
...Of course, there was a way to get Mei taken in. Report that this woman had broken into his house, and have them arrest her.
But even Shin felt a bit reluctant to go that far.
And so —
She was walking alongside Shin with the most natural expression imaginable.
"……Oh……"
Mei looked at the spell ring on the wall and the ceiling light with curious eyes, tracing the ring back and forth to turn the light on and off and on and off.
"...What are you doing?"
"It's just kind of fun."
"A plain ordinary light spell ring is fun? Don't tell me you don't even know what spell-formulas are."
"I know what spell-formulas are. It's the technique of transphasing spatial fields to alter the laws of physics, isn't it."
"...Trans-phasing?"
Again he had no idea what she was saying. Probably made up off the top of her head.
"But this...casting ring? It really is interesting.
How does it work?"
— Is she actually serious? —
Shin finally frowned. Could someone know what a spell-formula was and not know what a spell ring was? It wasn't even a question of being from the countryside.
Nowadays, no matter how rural a place you went, there would be spell rings somewhere in daily life.
Could amnesia cause such a strange kind of forgetting?
"...So, that ceiling..."
Still, he made an attempt at explanation. Shin indicated the area of the ceiling where the light glowed.
"There are spell rings embedded up there too, you can see that, right?
When you trace the spell-rune engraved on this one, it draws in the magical power of whoever is here — meaning me or you — and that activates to release the predetermined spell-formula. In this case, generating light.
And when you trace it the other way, or when the magical power runs out — that is, when people leave — it goes out.
That's the whole mechanism."
"...Hmm... but it's still interesting."

"Don't keep turning it on and off. It's annoying."
"Mumyu. For a mere underling number two, you're awfully bossy."
"Is underling number one a permanent vacancy now? ...Not that I've agreed to being an underling."
"I've decided it's retired in perpetuity."
"Ah. Right."
He brushed it off appropriately and headed to the kitchen, arms around a paper bag full of groceries.
The twilight outside the window was already deepening. The fruitless interrogation and the grocery shopping had somehow dragged on until now.
Mei followed half a step behind, and Shin glanced back over his shoulder at her.
"...So? You're staying here?"
Mei nodded.
"Well, think of it as your own home."
"Don't. And you're the one who shouldn't be saying that."
"Come on now. Though actually, you were secretly just now thinking 'no point saying anything to this one,' right?"
"I was. And since you know, leave."
"My, my. Just because you might feel a little envious of the softness, you don't have to —"
"Don't!"

The sun-fallen city was full of stillness.
In the entertainment district it was different, but in this residential area, it was generally like this.
A street stretching blackly as far as the eye could see. From the chimneys of the houses, smoke from evening meal preparations rose, and patrol officers went up and down the streets lighting the gas lamps.
They pressed one half of a spell ring carved into the lamp post against the other half in their hand, and traced it with a finger.
This opened the gas valve inside the lamp, and a small flame created by a spell-formula ignited it.
— Repeating that dull task, the patrol officer stopped his feet before one particular house.
Nothing special about it. Not particularly large, a somewhat aged one-story brick building. Some smell was drifting out — perhaps they were making dinner.
— The resident here was... Shindred... something...
The officer searched his memory.

From above, orders had come: pay attention to this house on patrol. There may be a suspicious individual targeting the residents here.
But what was he supposed to pay attention to, and how? If he paid attention, would a suspicious person conveniently appear and let themselves be caught? Was he supposed to stake this place out? But that wouldn't be a patrol.
— In the end —
The officer stood in front of Shin's house only as long as it took to grumble about those sorts of pointless, irrelevant matters.
He turned and glanced cursorily around, and walked off.
Without even noticing the existence of the strange creature the size of a dog lurking in the shadow of the nearby garden tree —

Cream soup, salad, bread, pepper-spiced chicken sauté.
"Roughly something like this."
That was tonight's dinner, laid out on the table with considerable self-satisfaction by Mei.
Shin and Mei sat facing each other across the table.
"Let's eat~"
At Mei's word, they reached for their spoons at the same time, and first took a spoonful of soup.
"Mmm, delicious!"
Mei's slightly over-performed voice was immediately overlaid by —
"Mmm, awful."
Shin's somewhat exaggerated voice.
『……』
The two stared at each other in silence across the table for a moment —
"— Ohh."
The one who leaned forward was Mei.
"So in other words, this is you challenging me?"
"Rather, claiming this is 'delicious' is a challenge to humanity."
Shin coolly countered.
"The seasoning itself isn't terrible. But see, cooking has certain small tricks at crucial points. The difference between whether you know and apply those little tricks or not ends up making quite a significant difference in the final taste."
"Nmuuuu."
Mei puffed up her cheeks and tapped her spoon rhythmically.
"If you're going to talk like that, I'll see your cooking tomorrow night!"
"You're still going to be here tomorrow?"

"Of course!"
……haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah……
She said it without the slightest hesitation, and Shin let out a deep sigh.
"Look. I should tell you, I have no parents."
Pikku, Mei reacted slightly.
"You understand what that means. If you insist on staying here, this house is just you and me."
"...That's how it would go."
"You understand what that means, right?"
Mei thought for a moment.
"...Taking turns making dinner?"
Shin fell into a sullen silence.
Was she dodging the question? Was she not worried about being alone under one roof with a man? Or did this girl, at this age, still think babies came from cabbage patches?
It didn't look like she was implying "do as you like with me," and even if she was, Shin would not want that either.
Trying to scare her into leaving — plan failed.

"...Anyway, forever —"
He started to say — and cut himself off.
"Forever what?"
"Shh. Did you just hear a sound?"
"Sound?"
Silence. Listening.
The living room window facing the back garden was open. Through it, all manner of sounds drifted in on the night breeze.
The sound of wind. The cries of insects. And — the sound of grass rustling.
Around the house was a modest garden, where tall grass and weeds had grown unchecked from long neglect.
But what was stirring them now was not the wind.
Something regular —
"Oh it's fine. Just footsteps."
"'It's fine' nothing! Someone... is there?"
"Hmm."
Mei cast her gaze elsewhere at Shin's murmur.
"Doesn't seem human. Something smaller, a few of them.
Isn't that those things from yesterday? The Jubias?"
The name Jubias — Shin couldn't immediately place it — and then remembered.
The dog-sized beasts.

The blood drained from his face all at once.
"Wait. Why would they be here."
He half-rose from his chair, but Mei, meanwhile, was nonchalant —
"Who knows. Maybe they caught my smell again?"
"You mean... it's dangerous here!?"
"Quite probably~"
"……!……"
Shin hurried to close the window, then dashed out of the dining room, and moments later came clattering back.
In his hand was a single wooden practice sword.
"...What's that?"
"If the time comes, I'll drive them off with this!"
It was a training wooden sword. The weight of it was solid, making it excellent for swinging practice, but how useful it would actually be was another question.
"Hmm. Good luck."
"As if that's someone else's problem!? You're the one being targeted!?"
"Well, we'll just have to be adaptable about it."
He ignored the incomprehensible non-answer and grabbed Mei's arm to pull her up from the chair.
His scores in mock sword combat at the training school were good. More than good, actually — one could say exceptional. He'd even beaten teachers, and as a result, had been disliked for it.
But practice and real combat were different.
It was a phrase the teachers Shin had defeated often used, but he had come to understand it last night.
In the fog. Facing the shadow's murderous intent, his body had frozen for a moment.
And those Jubias — the misshapen beasts.
If what was coming now were also Jubias, there was a strong possibility that the large shadow had also come.
Then what good were his mock combat scores and a wooden sword?
— Damn! What is the patrol squad doing!? Strengthening patrols, they said!
Internally cursing did nothing to bring help.
Should they just go outside and call for help? But he couldn't count on the patrol squad arriving promptly.
No, in the worst case, it might just mean dragging in uninvolved people from the neighborhood.
Then should they hole up here and buy time? Eventually someone would notice the disturbance and the patrol would come.
But — eventually means when exactly?

Then should they just bolt out after all?
His thoughts spun fruitlessly —
And the situation did not wait for Shin to get his thoughts together.
Zon!
A sound like slamming a wet towel against something.
A bizarre vibration that resonated to the core of his body.
At the same moment, a hole appeared abruptly in the dining room wall — the wall facing outside.
What had been a wall. What had been brick. Turned to gray fragments and fell to the floor.
The same spell-formula that had gone off in front of Shin when he'd first met Mei.
Time stopped.
Shin's gaze was fixed on the gap in the wall and the darkness beyond.
Beyond — in the midnight blue, something — moved.
"— Run!"
He said it and opened the room door and dashed into the hallway.
— Gee!
Grating cries. Sensing presences at their back, Shin slammed the door he'd come from shut —
Don! Gari kari karikari gari
Almost simultaneously something slammed into the door and began clawing.
"This way!"
"Hey... ow..."
Pulling Mei's hand toward the entrance. Desperate to put on shoes, opened the door —
Giki!
Instantly, two beasts leaped at Shin from the depths of the darkness!
Open jaws. Lined fangs. Twisted, sharp leg claws. Their gray eyes locked on him. The grotesque bestial forms burned into Shin's retinas in an instant.
"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"
He shouted and swung his right arm.
Even if his mind was in chaos, his body still remembered its training, and the wooden sword drove one of them away.
But in the instant the wooden sword stopped, the other one bit into it.
Miri.
A dull sound of wood straining.
Shin frantically swung the wooden sword. The struggling beast's claws raked his leg.
The fabric of his trousers tore with ease.
— Hyu!
Instinctively he breathed in sharply, and in the same instant Shin kicked out.

The fangs finally released the wooden sword, and the beast leaped back into the darkness.
Shin sprinted. Wooden sword in his right hand, Mei's arm in his left.
He burst out onto the main street and looked right. A short distance that way, there was a small patrol squad post.
But.
The nighttime road lit by five moons and street lamps.
On that road — numerous small shadows.
— That way's no good! —
He wheeled around and went left.
"Hey! Wait, where are you —!"
Mei's protest was of course ignored.
— Gee! Gee! Gigigi Gee!
Behind them, presences and sounds multiplied.
Driven on by the cries of the beasts, Shin ran along the street.
Black shadows that flitted at the edge of his vision — were those the shadows of small pursuers, or illusions born of chaos?
"Where are you going!?"
"How should I know!"
He threw it back, mixed with a cry.
In the left of his field of view — a shadow. Proof it was no illusion: it let out a warning growl.
...ri... giri Ri Ri ri ririri...
He changed direction to the right.
Hard to breathe. His chest and head burned. And yet his spine was gripped by a shiver.
"...Hey! Are you listening!?"
Mei was shouting something, but there was no room to pay attention.
Driven by fear and growls, running right then left, Shin suddenly found they had come to the edge of the residential district.
Someday, houses would probably be built here too. But for now there was only piled bricks and lumber. An empty lot overgrown with weeds. All of it bathed in moonlight.
— I need to get to the patrol post —
He looked around —
His heated body froze.
From behind a pile of materials, small shapes emerged.
From the flattened weeds, shadows rose.
The two of them were already surrounded by dozens of beasts — Jubias.
— I'm — an idiot —
Shin released Mei's hand and nearly stumbled.

He'd thought he was resisting. He'd thought he was desperately fleeing. But he was wrong. He had been herded. To this spot.
Come to think of it, the herding had been obvious. A method covered in first year at the training school — barely worth calling a tactic. If the same situation had appeared on a test, he could have listed ways to break through it in no time.
But — maybe this was what they meant by the air of actual combat. In an abnormal situation, he'd been completely unable to think, just running with the flow.
And this was the result.
Maybe Mei had been trying to point this out?
Shin sent his gaze to the girl.
But she was not looking at Shin, or at the beasts — she was looking into empty space.
"It's come."
The murmur from her small lips.
Shin followed her gaze —
In that instant he forgot even to breathe.
— Tonight is a lunar eclipse —
He suddenly remembered someone having said something like that.
In the night sky hung the five moons that circle this land — Crosscadia.
One of them — the moon Rene — was just now in the process of being hidden by the shadow of another — Kroneon.
Against the backdrop of that brilliantly shining moon.
Wings descended to the earth.
— A winged being —
But it could not be called human. If there was anything humanlike about it, it was perhaps the leather armor it appeared to wear, and the large clawed gauntlets on both arms.
Its long limbs were bizarrely twisted, and from its head jutted several horns curved like evolution-gone-wrong shells. Its eyes held no mercy, and the wings on its back were a curtain of darkness.
A form unlike anything he had ever seen.
But Shin knew what it was.
— A Diva —
In the war of old, they were feared and called demons, and legend said they had in ancient ages challenged the gods of creation. A race.
Mighty physique and immense magical power. Even fifty years after the war ended, they were spoken of with hatred and fear.
This was Shin's first time encountering one in person, but —
He could understand how legends had been born.

Just facing it — just that — made his skin feel as if it was being scorched. And simultaneously his spine — the core of his body — began rapidly cooling.
No hostility had been directed at him. Just a gaze was being sent.
Just that — a pressure like his soul being crushed.
"— A smell —"
Words leaked from the Diva's mouth. Like miasma rising from an abyss.
"There is a smell. Certainly."
The dark-colored wings rippled.
At the same time the Diva charged toward Shin and Mei!
Shin instinctively leaped sideways. But the opponent was far faster than he'd imagined.
The form filled his field of vision. He steeled himself to die, clenched his back teeth —
— They passed each other.
Without even time to gasp.
In Shin's field of vision, the scene unfolded.
The Diva swung one arm casually.
Mei was there.
Struck across the stomach — with a bursting sound — Mei was sent flying.
Scattering something as she went.
The freezing instant ended.
The girl's body rolled across the earth with the rustling of grass.
Mixed into the air, a raw, rusty metallic smell.
Even to Shin, with his thoughts half-paralyzed — it was unmistakably clear.
Mei had just been killed.

He could not breathe.
He could tell his hands and feet were trembling slightly.
Shin moved only his eyes and looked that way.
The body lying in the distant grass. It was already making small death convulsions.
Before him — the form. Its gaze was not on Shin but on the fallen shadow.
Right. What this creature was targeting was Mei, not Shin. He had known that. He should have.
And he had — in that instant — without thinking, dodged out of the way.
Without saving the girl.
— Was this unbearable nausea just from the heavy smell of blood that hung in the air?
—
Darkness spread in his field of vision. The Diva had turned its back — its wings — to him.
Shin was beneath its notice.
He more or less understood what it intended to do.

It was going to deliver a finishing blow. To Mei, who by now had no chance of being saved.
The Diva slowly walked forward.
He felt sick. His head hurt too.
Was he just going to keep watching, unable to do anything after all? Unable to do anything at all. Nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing —
"……aaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"
He screamed and raised the wooden sword above his head.
The Diva — turned.

— Tonight is a lunar eclipse —
Someone had said something like that, she suddenly recalled.
In the night sky hung many moons.
Looking up at the moon and starry sky — the girl was dying.
— Why —
Lying on her back. Feeling the heat and strength draining from her abdomen one after another, Mei held a question.
She was not scared.
She was not scared.
That's right. Not scared at all. Not of the Jubias. Not even of the Diva.
There was no way creatures like these could kill her.
For no reason, Mei had been convinced of that.
But now —
She was dying.
— Why —
The question word arose again. Of course no one answered.
Honestly, even at this point, Mei had a feeling it wouldn't end here.
But by now her body wouldn't move even a little, and perhaps her vision had faded — the moons she looked up at seemed strangely dim.
Two of them had already fully overlapped —
…kofu…
A small coughing of blood — a faint smile at the corner of her mouth.
She had remembered. Mei had. Just a little.

The Diva turned without emotion toward the scream it heard behind it.
There stood a human who had lost a companion and was in a rage.
An insignificant existence.

What the human held was just a wooden sword. With something like this, they couldn't fight even the Jubias properly. Let alone raise it against oneself — a completely irrational act.
And yet — its kind too felt pain when struck, and held no fondness for pain. That was why it had stopped and turned. Nothing more.
But that alone was enough — the human before it, wooden sword raised, had stopped moving.
Not quite sure why — but the face without wrinkles meant this was a young Hume.
Seeing a Diva for the first time in its life, watching its companion be killed right before it — afraid, confused.
— Now, what to do —
The Diva thought briefly.
The mission assigned was "assassination of the target with the strange smell."
It was already a strange mission in itself, but when it sensed the target's smell, it had somehow felt as if it understood the meaning.
That target had now been killed.
To be precise, it still breathed. The wound was definitely fatal — it would not survive — but until the finishing blow was delivered, the mission could not be called fully accomplished.
The quickest way to finish was to dispatch the inconvenient Hume in front of it and deliver the killing blow to the target, but —
Orders from above: do not cause too large a disturbance if possible.
Was killing one Hume in front of it within or outside the "if possible" tolerance?
The life of some extra Hume didn't seem like much of an issue, but earlier, merely using a spell-formula inside the city had drawn a rebuke: don't make too much of a scene.
Being held responsible for this sort of thing and punished by having its claws and horns cut — no thank you.
So then it shouldn't kill — but if it turned its back now, the Hume before it would come swinging the wooden sword. That too, it would prefer to avoid.
But waiting like this for the target to slowly die seemed rather anticlimactic too.
— Even I am troubled over a trifling thing —
The thought made the Diva give a rueful smile.

In the moonlight.
An evil smile spread across the Diva's lips.
— I'm going to be killed —
Shin sensed it instinctively.
Whether it was some power the Diva possessed or his own fear, Shin's body wouldn't move a single bit.

The Diva — opened its mouth.
"Go."
Shin's body gave a small shudder.
"Forget."
Did that mean: pretend you saw nothing? Did it mean it was letting him go?
The shackle vanished like a lie, and the hand that had been holding the wooden sword high came down. His feet stumbled one step back.
Breathing hard, Shin turned on his heel — and tried to —
He remembered.
Mei.
The girl who lay on the brink of death.
Even if the Diva disappeared right now and he took the girl to a doctor, honestly he wasn't sure she would survive. But even so — was it okay to abandon her and flee?
But if he stayed here, what could he do? What good would a wooden sword against the Diva and the beasts do? Wouldn't it just mean two corpses instead of one?
Then should he just leave after all?
Leaving was easy. But forgetting would be difficult. Would he have to carry through the rest of his life the self that had abandoned the girl and fled? Thoughts, vision, world wavered.
Breathing hard, Shin stood still.
A stretch of time. And then —
It was the Diva that moved first.
Not because it had decided to kill Shin. It had simply thought of a quicker method.
— Gee, ru, ru, Ru!
What leaked from its mouth was a sound like a beast's growl.
At the same moment — the beasts that had been standing perfectly still up until then moved.
Toward the fallen Mei.
Shin understood. Their purpose.
The beasts — the Jubias — were going to deliver the killing blow to Mei.
The moment he understood that —
"Stop them!!"
Raising the wooden sword with a shout, Shin ran. Toward where Mei had fallen.
The Diva stretched out one arm to block his path.
It probably would not let him go this time.
Shin raised the wooden sword to knock that arm away.
In his field of vision, several Jubias leaping at the fallen Mei.
— Not going to make it —
Despair crossed his mind at that instant.

Don!
A ring of light spread.
— Gee!?
The Jubias — were blasted away.
Leaving only screams, the beasts were repelled in a great arc, and without even being allowed to fall to the ground they were torn apart, disassembled, and scattered to nothing in the void.
— !?
Sensing the change, the Diva turned, and Shin's wooden sword cut through empty air.
The gazes of both went to the same place.
Slowly.
The shadow of the girl rose to its feet.
"……Impossible……"
The Diva's hoarse murmur.
— Hafu…
What leaked from the mouth of the girl looking up at the sky was a small breath — it sounded like nothing more.
But at that moment.
Go!
A sudden crushing pressure pinned Shin, the beasts, not even allowing a scream, to the earth.
"— Gah……!"
Even the Diva. Letting out a strained groan, it fell to one knee.
Pinned against the ground, Shin barely managed to sweep his gaze around. His body was impossibly heavy, as if something were pressing down on him. He could barely even draw breath.

But it was happening equally to everyone present.
The Diva struggling to rise. The beasts that could no longer move. Even the weeds around them, unable to bear their own weight, crumpled and lay flat to the ground.
Amid that. The sole exception standing lightly — the girl, Mei.
Far overhead, centered on her, a massive ring of light had appeared, covering the area like a shield.
An orange glowing ring tracing some kind of pattern. Resembling a large spell ring.
— No —
Shin was recalling something. Knowledge he'd learned at the training school before.
Races with tremendous magical power can, without the aid of tools, draw spell rings in the void and activate spell-formulas.
The spell rings humans used were nothing but tools that imitated this.

In other words, what stood before him now — this was a true spell ring.
He understood. This phenomenon that could be called hypergravity — this was generating it. And the one doing it was, probably — Mei.
Behind the light Mei's expression was unreadable. But her left hand appeared bizarrely large — was it Shin's optical illusion?
"— Gu…… roAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"
The Diva roared.
A pale blue light wrapped in bands around its body — and the Diva rose to its feet, wrapped in bands of light.
It was using those to neutralize Mei's spell.
But it no longer had the luxury of calm.
"……What are you…… who are you……?"
Wariness colored its voice.
Instead of answering, Mei released the spell.
The light in the sky faded and scattered, and the pressure that had been on Shin's body vanished effortlessly.
The restraints freed, Shin rose, and so did the Jubias.
Several of those Jubias lunged at Mei.
She did nothing.
No, it looked like she did nothing.
But suddenly, in the space around Mei, several yellow glowing spell rings were engraved like a protective shield —
Bachi!
The pale lightning that burst out struck down every single Jubia that leaped at her.
Aiming for that moment.
— Rugaa!
The Diva roared.
A black spell ring darker than night was engraved in the darkness, and from within it, a gray sphere appeared and was released toward Mei.
But the white spell ring that appeared before Mei returned that — what should have been a force of destruction — effortlessly to the void.
"……Gu……"
Bit by bit the Diva stepped back, then curled its tongue around its hooked claw — the steel that had ripped into Mei — and licked it.
"……It seems you intend to……"
"Do it seriously, is that what you're thinking?"
What was heard was a fourth voice.
『— !?』
Eyes turned to it.

To Shin's left — atop a pile of bricks in the empty lot.
A figure sitting there quietly. Among the darkness-shrouded form, only the two eyes shone, holding golden light.
"In the middle of a town like this — full of Humes?"
Shin had heard that voice before.
"— You there —"
The Diva instantly recognized who it was and murmured:
"Scale King —"
"Correct."
When on earth had he arrived?
Lezerd, the exchange student from the foreign country — the country of the Scale Kings — spoke in the same tone as always.
You could see at a glance it was still the training school uniform. His appearance was not very different from a human's.
But while he had changed his outward appearance to human form using a spell-formula, the fact that his true nature was a member of a northern race possessing power comparable to a Diva was an undeniable fact.
"Why is a lizard in a place like this?"
"……That is a discriminatory remark.
As for why I'm in this city — it would take too long to explain, so I'll omit that.
If you mean why I'm here right now — I noticed your smell, and came over while hiding sound and smell.
That's all."
Answering the Diva's question, Lezerd turned his gaze toward Shin and tossed something toward him.
He reflexively caught what traced a glittering parabola through the night sky.
"This — for you."
"...What is this?"
Shin said in a dry voice.
About the size of a sword handle. Overall gold, with a thin silver decorative element in a spiral pattern.
A band-like — somehow familiar pattern engraved in it.
It resembled the spell-rune of a spell ring.
"With that,"
Lezerd said. Turning his faintly glowing eyes this way.
"Even a demon — can be killed."
"……That was a discriminatory remark too."
Still, the composure to crack a light joke had returned.
In short, this was a weapon effective even against a Diva.

Shin still didn't understand the situation. About the Diva. About Mei. About Lezerd.
But for the time being — at least the situation where he'd be one-sidedly killed by the Diva had been averted, perhaps.
"Well then."
Lezerd turned his gaze back to the Diva.
"What will you do?"
The silence lasted barely a moment.
The Diva wheeled its wings and rose into the air.
Mei watched it.
"— You —"
Lezerd's question was cut short as the girl turned her gaze to him.
"Who are you?"
"Well, if you ask 'who' —"
Back came Mei's voice in the usual tone.
Hearing it, Shin let out a small breath of relief.
— No, this isn't the time to feel relieved —
He thought and snapped his gaze up.
There was the small shadow of wings flying away.
He finally understood. The Diva had retreated.
Looking around, the beasts — Jubias — that had been there were also gone.
All at once the tension left his shoulders. It seemed to be over — for now.
Relieved, he suddenly remembered. That Mei had taken the Diva's blow full-on.
He threw down the wooden sword and ran to Mei.
"Are you okay!?"
"...'Are you okay,' nothing... honestly..."
Mei pressed her right index finger to her temple.
"I thought you might have some kind of plan, but you just dodged by yourself...
Because of that I took a hit I couldn't dodge."
"But that wound —"
He started to speak, and Shin froze.
Only now that he was close could he see Mei's condition properly.
The clothing around her side was torn open, with a palm-sized hole gaping.
Around it. And around Mei's mouth. Dried, blackened blood clung.
But under the torn clothing, in the moonlight — there was unmarked white skin.
Impossible.
That she had received a wound was clear from the massive bloodstains.
But even using spell-formulas, healing a wound that severe in such a short time was impossible — or rather, if the wound had been proportional to the state of the torn clothing, it shouldn't have been possible to survive in the first place.

And one more impossible thing.
Mei's left arm.
That was the reason it had appeared strangely large just now — he finally understood.
The entire left arm was covered in white fur.
The fingers seemed extended too, and overall it looked less like a human hand and more like the leg of some kind of beast.
"That wound is already healed.
...So, what? Why are you looking at me like that?"
"...No... what do you mean, what... your left hand..."
"Left hand?"
Mei raised her left hand before her eyes —
"....."
She stared at it for a while, then:
"What's wrong with my left hand?"
"What do you mean, it's obviously strange! Blatantly!"
"How so!?"
"All of it!"
"How rude. Just because you're a little jealous of the fluffiness —"
"I am not jealous! And why are you so completely calm about this!?"
"Because. Well, a left hand is like this."
"It is not!"
"Hmm..."
Mei made a troubled expression, and scratched her cheek with her left hand, sent a pleading look at Lezerd.
"Normally it's like this, right."
"Normally, I don't think so."
Lezerd also shook his head.
"If forced to find something similar... the arm of a Possession Tribe that has partially beastified looks something like that, but partial beastification of only an arm is something I've never heard of."
"...Ah..."
Mei tilted her head again.
"In the region where I'm from, it's probably normal."
"It's not a regional issue either."
Shin retorted immediately, and Mei puffed up her cheeks.
"Mumyu. Only a useless underling number two acts so bossy at a time like this."
"......Ugh....."
Useless.

When she put it that way, Shin had to admit it hurt. He had been goaded by the Diva and nearly gotten Mei killed.
"...Oh. Did that actually get to you?"
"Shut up.
And anyway —"
Shin glanced briefly at Lezerd.
"He — Lezerd — said it too... Mei, what exactly are you?"
"Like I keep saying, there's no way to answer a question asked like that.
For instance, underling number two, if someone asked you 'who are you,' you could only answer 'I am Lady Mei's loyal servant,' right?"
"I would not answer that."
"Then let me rephrase the question."
Lezerd said.
"Where were you born, what race are you, and what are your origins?"
"I am —"
Mei sent a distant gaze toward the night sky —
Sent it —
Kept sending it in silence —
And tilted her head slightly.
"...Hmm?"
"It's not 'Hmm?'
Weren't you the one who said you lost your memory? You."
"...Yeah, but..."
Mei pressed her left index finger to her temple.
"Just now I seemed to be remembering something..."
"— Wait, your left hand!"
"Huh?"
At Shin's words, Mei looked at her left hand.
The left hand covered in white beast fur — which was now a perfectly ordinary hand.
It had returned to normal before either of them had noticed.
"Whoa!?"
"What do you mean, how did it go back!? And then being surprised about that!"
"Hmm... too bad isn't it. I liked the fluffy version."
"Not 'too bad,' this isn't a matter of what you liked, it's unreasonable!"
"Now now. Both of you."
Lezerd's voice smoothing things over.
"Does it really matter? As long as it's interesting."
『It does matter.』
The voices of Shin and Mei harmonized perfectly.

Just touching the spell ring on the wall lit the hallway ceiling.
Human tools weren't so bad after all. Lezerd genuinely thought so.
Unlike Humes, they the Draguno didn't need the aid of such tools — they could use spell-formulas just by uttering the spell-words. But that also meant spell-formulas couldn't be used if the spell-words were not correctly spoken.
On that point, this spell ring was convenient in that its performance was stable. Anyone could make a light — even a baby who didn't know words — simply by tracing it.
In fact, Lezerd quite liked this Hume-style life.
He had returned here after parting with the others when the night was already deep.
He'd had any number of things he wanted to ask them, but the two of them had been excited about all sorts of things and seemed to be on guard, so for tonight he'd quietly come home.
The special room assigned to him as a foreign student. A building separate from the ordinary dormitory. It was reasonably spacious with high ceilings.
— "Special room" — it sounded lavish, but in reality it was probably isolation.
Even if he had "disguised" himself to look the same as humans, his true nature was that of a Draguno. Perhaps in case something happened, they had prepared this "special" room, separate from the rooms for ordinary students.
In fact, looking carefully, the building itself was solidly made, but it was quite an old structure.
Still, water, cooking gas, and spell-formula lighting were properly set up, and he wasn't being charged rent, so Lezerd was satisfied with this.
He went straight to the innermost room.
On the wall hung a large mirror, large enough to reflect a full human figure. A thin gold frame, no decoration, completely plain.
It was one of the things he'd brought from home. He stood before it —
...urulu ru...
A low groan — that was the only way to describe it — leaked from his throat.
A high-speed spell incantation with language compression — that might be one way to put it. What they Draguno simply called "spell-words."
The surface of the mirror standing against the wall rippled like a water surface touched by wind.
He faced it.
"Lezerd Gynos Rezizanol, child of Gynos, here. Please connect me to Elder Dragon-sama."
The ripples settled — and then rippled again.
At the same time a voice resonated in the room — a voice.

『……Oh……it has been a while. Lezerd, child of Gynos……』
A warm, old-man-like voice.
It traveled through the mirror — no, the tool that looked like a mirror and the spell-formula — from one far away.
『How are things? The land of Humes? Are you being treated properly?』
"Yes. There are things in various ways different from our customs, but that too is an interesting discovery.
More than that —
Today I have an even more interesting story."
『Oh?』
"I met a Hume with a smell I had never encountered."
『……Oh.』
In the gap of that brief reply, Lezerd went on without showing any sign of noticing:
"They commanded spell-formulas I was not familiar with, and for a time one arm transformed into a different form.
Going by what they said, it seems their memory is lost, but —
The greatest problem is that a Diva is in motion concerning this Hume."
『……』
This silence — was long.
"Just to report.
And on the chance that Elder Dragon-sama might know something, I thought."
At Lezerd's encouraging words, the mirror trembled.
『……You must also be aware of the recent strange events……』
"Could this be related?"
『— I don't know —
In any case I will look into it on this end.
You — do not take your eyes off that Hume.』
"Understood."
『Until next time then.
— May blessings be upon your scales —』
"— Blessings —"
The surface rippled greatly — and, its role of carrying voices complete, returned to the plain mirror it had been before.
— Come to think of it, he had forgotten to mention that he'd given the spell-formula sword to the human nearby…
Well, this could wait.
"Ah."
One more thing. He remembered something else he'd forgotten, and Lezerd gave a small exclamation.

— With that, even a demon can be killed —
Lezerd had said that to Shin when he'd given him the spell-formula sword.
But he had forgotten to add this:
— Assuming a human can use it — but —
Forgetting to say this was really somewhat problematic.
"...I'll say it tomorrow."
He murmured, stifled a yawn, and headed off to take a shower.

The winged shadow cut between the moons and headed toward a small hill.
Some distance from the white elegant main building — a guest annex.
Its second-floor window, facing a veranda, opened to welcome the wings.
...to...
With a small sound it landed — it was the Diva that had attacked Mei.
"— How did it go?"
The one who greeted it, stepping lightly from the window, was another shadow.
A Diva too.
Same black wings, same air — but looking closely, there were quite significant differences in appearance.
This one's limbs were closer to human proportions, and three horns grew from only the right side of its head, curving backward.
What it wore was, perhaps ceremonial formal dress — black with gold and silver thread woven in.
It was the Diva that had previously negotiated with the Lord Mayor.
Toward that one, the arrived Diva posed a question:
"What is that? Lord Master Burgiolas."
"....."
Burgiolas, as the Diva was called, was silent for a moment.
".....What did you see? Kelmizo."
".....I found a Hume female with a strange smell. I located her in a house together with a Hume male, and drove them out."
Asked, the Diva that had attacked Mei recounted:
"I ripped open its abdomen and killed it.
I killed it.
It still breathed, but that was certainly a fatal wound.
These hands remember the sensation of tearing out its innards. These eyes saw the flying scraps of flesh. These nostrils remember the smell of blood mixed in the wind.
The taste of blood and flesh was on my claws. It was not a vision —"
It spoke, then fell silent for a moment.

"— And then?"
Urged by Burgiolas, Kelmizo finally wrung out words:
"When I tried to deliver the finishing blow… it stood up."
"……"
"The wound had vanished without a trace… healing a wound that severe in that short a time is impossible for anyone……"
"……"
"Without making a sound it commanded spell-formulas, defeated the attacking Jubias, and deflected my spell.
What it looked like was……"
Kelmizo cut off the words once — and ultimately, did not speak the thought it had arrived at, continuing instead:
"There —
A Scale King in Hume form appeared."
"A Draguno?"
"Yes."
Of course, in truth, Shin had also been present — but for Kelmizo, that was a detail too trivial to mention.
"I judged that the situation had moved beyond the range of what this Kelmizo could assess, and withdrew."
"……"
Burgiolas thought in silence for a moment.
"……Is this the truth?"
"Yes. On my horns and claws."
It lowered its head deeply once, then raised its face again, met Burgiolas's eyes.
"Lord Master Burgiolas. Please tell me.
The Hume this Kelmizo was ordered to kill… no, the one who wore Hume form…
What in the world was that?"
"……Either way — if a Draguno has appeared, the story is different."
Brushing aside the answer, Burgiolas said.
It did not know? Or it knew but could not say?
If the former, then this assassination order had come from somewhere above Burgiolas.
Either way — it was not something Kelmizo needed to know. Without asking further, it gave a small nod.
"Then — ?"
"Keep constant track of it and that Draguno's movements.
Strike if the opportunity arises.
But if no opportunity presents itself, observe only."

"Your will."
In the head of Kelmizo, who sent the wing-folding salute, swirled only one thought: how it might dispose of that strange Hume and that Draguno.

Blade in Hand, Death Before Me

In the age of creation.
The gods spent two days creating this land of Crosscadia, and then, one per day, brought forth five moons over Crosscadia — Kroneon, Varta, Rene, Agar, Terror.
A distant myth.
Following that myth, human life was also divided into seven days.
The two days on which this earth was created were set as days of rest in honor of that great achievement, with the remaining five as days of labor — a week of seven days called, respectively, Cross, Cadi, Neon, Varta, Rene, Agar, and Terror.
...Well, to put it simply.
It was good that today, the day of Cadi, was the second day of a consecutive holiday.
Even Shin couldn't bring himself to leave Mei alone at home and go off to the training school, not so soon after what had happened yesterday.
He woke up on the living room sofa and recalled the events of last night.
Memories like a bad dream.
But it was no dream.
After all that last night.
He'd expected to be questioned thoroughly, but unexpectedly, Lezerd had left without much fuss, and Shin and Mei had also made their way home.
Seen in the light, Mei's state had been grim. Her tattered clothing and around her mouth were covered in bloodstains. And yet she was perfectly fine, which he couldn't quite bring himself to believe —
Wondering if maybe she was pushing herself —
With such worries he'd spent the night: after having her wash off the dirt in the shower, he'd given her the bed, and after propping the table against the large hole in the dining room wall as a temporary fix, he'd slept on the living room sofa.
He remembered all of it clearly.
And most of all, proof that it had been real lay on the table beside him — the thing that passed for a weapon, handed to him by Lezerd and left just as it was, rolled there.
— Come to think of it, was Mei all right? Could it be that because of yesterday's wound, she'd died in the bed?
An ill-omened fantasy suddenly surfaced, and Shin hurried toward the bedroom.

A dim room with closed curtains.
The girl lay quietly in the bed at the back.
Mouth slightly open, not moving a single bit. Whether it was his imagination, her face looked oddly pale.
— Was she really alive? If he lifted the sheet pulled up to her chin, would he find her lying there with her abdomen ripped open, the bed dyed in blood?
A dark imagination swelling up.
Shin nervously approached the bed and gently reached out —
Punyu.
He tried poking Mei's cheek.
"……uniruii……"
Scrunching her brow and letting out a small groan, Mei rolled over.
— Good. She's alive.
He felt relieved — and was instantly annoyed.
— Why do I have to worry about someone like this —
On a whim of irritation, one chop.
Bissu!
"Ow!"
The strike landed directly in Mei's face, and she launched both hands and feet into the air.
Frantically writhing, she tumbled off the far side of the bed —
"……nmuuuuuuu……"
With half-asleep eyes she crawled back up, and blearily stared at Shin for a moment.
He obviously couldn't keep her in bloodstained clothes, so for now he'd lent her his pajamas. Of course the size was far too big, and combined with her bed-rumpled hair and vacant expression, she looked thoroughly slovenly.
"……Morning……?"
"Morning. You're up?"
"……I'm up……"
"Get ready to eat."
"……eat……"
She followed the turned-away Shin, shuffling barefoot along in a tottering gait.
The living room. He dragged the table that had been propped against the wall back to the center of the room.
The large hole left behind after moving the table summoned memories of last night whether he liked it or not.
— The drowsy-eyed Mei didn't seem to mind at all, though.
Sitting at his chair, setting Mei aside as she dozed, Shin prepared breakfast.

He put the pot on the heat and cut the bread bought yesterday to an appropriate thickness. He also cut the cheese and bacon stored in the under-floor pantry, and tore the lettuce by hand into appropriate pieces.
He stopped the pot before it came to a full boil, added fermented tea leaves to draw out the sweetness.
He improvised a dressing with oil, salt, and vinegar, poured it over the torn lettuce, and the lazy salad was done.
All that remained was checking on the fermented tea and carrying it all to the table.
"Here. Eat."
A cup of fermented tea. Bread with bacon, cheese, and salad on top. That was today's breakfast menu.
"……mnm……"
Mei took a sip of tea. Then a bite of bread, toppings and all.
"……uh……"
"What?"
"……nothing."
And with that Mei polished off the first piece in no time.
"More."
"……."
He silently handed her a second piece. That was gone in no time too. Just about as fast as Shin finished his first.
"More."
"There isn't any more."
"……there's one more piece."
"That one is mine."
In a natural motion, he reached out and took it before Mei could.
"Hmm. Such a small-hearted person."
"Well, I'm apparently a villain's underling. Me."
He put the bacon, cheese, and salad on the bread.
"See, that's exactly why showing a kind side every now and then is the secret to boosting your likability, or your underling appealing to my good mood has a nice sycophantic feel to it, or ahhhh —"
Bakuri.
"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa"
Seeing Shin take a bite of the bread, Mei let out a pitiful groan.
"……were you really that desperate to eat it?"
"……no. Not at all. Not even a little. Not in the slightest."
Mei stuck out her lower lip and averted her gaze. Shin secretly let out a sigh.
"All right, all right.

If we go out later, I'll get you something to eat."
"We're going out? Me too?"
"We need to do something about your clothes, don't we. I'm telling you now, nothing expensive.
And we have to explain things to the patrol squad. You're coming with me."
"Yes sir~.
Oh, right. That... coffee? Stuff you were drinking yesterday, I want to try it."
"Yes, yes. Got it."
Brushing aside Mei's words now that she was in better spirits, Shin took a sip of fermented tea.

"……Hmmm……Divas, you say……"
After a long — very long silence.
The veteran patrol officer's voice, having listened to Shin's story, overflowed with a pristine, refreshing lack of motivation.
Burgess Central Police Station.
Shin and Mei had come here after buying Mei's clothes and getting a light meal.
They were ushered into a small room, explained the circumstances —
And this was the reaction they received.
"You don't believe me. What I'm saying."
The officer met Shin's glare with tired, listless eyes.
"Would you believe it? If someone else told you the same story?"
"……"
Asked that, he was at a loss for words.
A girl with amnesia I'd never met started bothering me, and I was attacked by a Diva who was after her. Please do something.
If someone else came to him with that story, Shin would answer without hesitation:
— Just go home and get some sleep already —
He knew it was a dubious story himself. That was why he'd deliberately left some parts out.
For instance, the change in Mei's arm. Lezerd's intervention.
So all he'd told the officer was that they'd been attacked by a Diva and had escaped.
...Of course, even then it was still sufficiently dubious.
But Shin raised his eyes.
"But —
Once, in the city. And last night, at my house.
Someone used spell-formulas and destroyed a number of things.
That, is fact."

Without answering, the veteran officer rose from his seat, walked to the window, sent a distant gaze outside.
"— I'm actually a graduate of the military school myself, you know.
...No, I suppose now I have to call it the training school.
The training was tough, but I have all kinds of pleasant memories too."
"Why are we suddenly hearing old-man reminiscing?"
Mei cut in from where she sat. Shin felt the same, but it probably meant something.
There was no point in needlessly antagonizing the officer.
"……be quiet and drink your tea."
"Yes, sir~"
Shin's murmur got a bored reply from Mei, who sipped the lukewarm, weak tea that had been served.
The officer continued his story.
"I had quite a few friends I got along well with.
When we gathered, we'd pull some pretty wild pranks just by going along with the mood.
Back then the rules were strict, too. Everyone was required to live in the dormitory.
And calling it a dormitory, it was more like a prison surrounded by high walls. No recreational facilities whatsoever. And on top of that, going out anywhere other than the dorm and school was forbidden unless you had a special reason.
Even so, we were at the age where all we wanted to do was have fun.
— So. One day, the group of us snuck some spell rings out of the school's supply room.
The plan was to use a trench-digging spell-formula to dig a secret tunnel connecting inside and outside the wall, and sneak out from there to go have fun.
But as it turned out...
Apparently we'd taken the wrong spell rings.
The moment we used the spell-formula, the wall blew off magnificently and it became a huge commotion."
"……hold on……"
Shin called a stop in an irritated voice.
He glared at the turning officer.
"Could it be……
You're thinking that I snuck spell rings out of the training school, used them half for fun, and am making up a story... is that what you think?"
"I didn't say it was you.
But perhaps an acquaintance of yours took the spell rings and is harassing you or playing a prank on you..."
"Then what about that Diva!? The beasts called Jubias!?"
"There was such a thing as a spell-formula that shows illusions, as I recall?

I learned it at the military school long ago, but 'Jubias' is the name of a beast the Divas used in the war, isn't it.
Well, they were something like military dogs, apparently. I've only seen them in pictures myself, but they were quite grotesque creatures.
Is this taught in the training school now?
Even if it isn't, the library should have materials on that sort of thing.
One could also think someone who saw that got a mischievous idea."
Don't be ridiculous.
Shin wanted to shout that.
Those were illusions created by spell-formulas? That was absurd.
"Of course, as far as you're concerned, you can't just accept, oh, it was all an illusion, and be satisfied."
As if seeing right through him, the officer continued.
"But for me, the explanation that someone was playing a prank on you and the girl to tease you is more convincing than the story that a Diva came all the way to this city with Jubias in tow and attacked you two."
"But this person yesterday was badly wounded by that Diva!"
"A wound?"
At Shin's words, which had slipped out, the officer reacted with a small jolt.
"And that wound?"
By the time he thought "oh no," it was already too late.
"What happened? Did she see a doctor?"
"....."
While Shin was struggling to answer, from beside him Mei said casually:
"It healed."
".....Healed.....?"
"Yep."
".....I see.....A terrible wound suffered just last night, you say.....?"
"More or less~"
"Any scars?"
"Clean as a whistle."
Dubious factor: critical mass exceeded.
The suspicion that had been floating on the officer's face changed to exasperation.
— This is no good. At this rate we'll be completely dismissed as making things up —
"Our school has an exchange student from the Draguno."
Having no choice, Shin decided to rope in Lezerd as well.
The officer's expression changed slightly.
"He witnessed the incident too. Please check with him as well.

Just so you know, if what I'm saying is true and a Diva and Draguno get into a fight... that would be an international incident, wouldn't it.
And if that happens and it turns out to be 'we were told but didn't believe it'..."
International incident.
Presented with that inconvenient-sounding phrase, the officer made a sour face.
"……A Draguno exchange student……huh……"
Still in an overtly dubious tone, but even so the officer said:
"……well……something happened, and an offensive spell-formula was discharged.
That much is indisputable fact. We naturally intend to pursue the investigation regarding that as well.
……All right. I'll check with that exchange student too.
We may end up placing a guard at your house depending on circumstances. Either way, we'll send officers today to do an investigation, so if you could leave the hole in the wall as is until then, that would help.
You'll probably be asked various questions, so please cooperate when that time comes."
The officer stopped there.
The conversation was over.
That was, apparently, the situation.
"...Let's go."
"Yes sir~"
Urging Mei and walking together.
The two left the Central Police Station behind.

They got home while it was still far from evening.
A precious holiday. Too early to come home, but they had no way of knowing when the patrol squad would come to do an on-site investigation. They couldn't wander the city until late.
He handed over the clothes and told Mei to change in the other room, then put away the dinner ingredients he'd bought on the way back.
He settled heavily into a chair in the living room — his gaze drifting toward the large hole in the wall.
He was in low spirits.
Yesterday he had been attacked by a Diva, and by the looks of things a second attack was also possible. And yet the patrol squad was not particularly reliable.
There was no way to be cheerful in this situation, but the greatest cause of his low spirits was something else.
"I tried it on~"

The one who burst through the door was of course Mei. A white shirt and navy trousers she'd bought today.
Being cheap goods of course, the design and quality both had a secondhand feel, but they suited her well enough.
"……oh……want some tea?"
He said it and went to the kitchen, brewed two cups of fermented tea, and offered one to Mei.
"……"
A questioning look from Mei.
"……what?"
"You've been generous since this morning, and I was wondering why.
Yesterday you'd say something like 'if you want tea, make it yourself.'
— Oh! Could this be?"
Mei broke into a knowing unpleasant smile.
"Does this mean you've started to develop a sense of yourself as my underling~?"
"A sense of that kind would never develop."
"Well, if you won't at least develop it by force, there is such a thing as my dignity as a superior —"
"Roll it up and throw it away. That dignity. Even if you hold it dear, it'll just rot."
Shin put his own cup on his seat too, and sat down.
He drank his tea in silence for a while.
Eventually.
"……hey. If you have something to say, say it."
The one who put down her cup and spoke was Mei.
"What do you mean by that?"
"Because you have that look on your face like you want to say something but don't want to say it, like there's something stuck between your back teeth."
"Like there's something stuck between my back teeth."
"Your face right now.
Come on. Just go ahead and say or ask whatever it is.
I'll give you quick answers."
"……then……let me ask……"
Shin said, somewhat reluctantly.
"Yesterday……the spell-formula you used against the Diva……
How did you manage something like that?"
"I don't know."
"You said you'd answer!"
"I did answer. 'I don't know,' I said.
……hmm, how to put it……"

Mei wrinkled her brow in thought.
"At that time — it was perfectly natural that I could use those spell-formulas.
I was remembering all kinds of things.
But then somehow, pretty quickly... I forget, or maybe it's more like I can't recall anymore."
"What is that supposed to mean.
So right now, you can't use spell-formulas either?"
"……well……"
Mei looked around, stood from her chair, and walked toward the window.
She traced her finger in a circle around the area with the latch, drawing a circle in the air —
Ka-chin.
With a small sound, the latch came undone.
"—!"
Shin drew a small sharp breath, and Mei turned around.
"This is about what I can do right now."
She said it as if it were nothing.
Shin had watched. Mei's finger did not touch the latch.
In other words she — had undone the latch using a spell-formula. Without a spell ring.
"— I see —"
He understood, in a daze.
"You used that trick to get into my house!?"
"Ah! That slipped out!"
"……well……at this point that doesn't really matter……"
Shin said.
Even if the trick was exposed, there was nothing he could do about it if the answer was "I used a spell-formula to open the lock." And above all, honestly, Shin had no intention of throwing Mei out at this point anymore.
"But why can you use spell-formulas without a spell ring?"
"……who knows……it's not something I can explain the 'why' of……"
Without a spell ring, a person cannot use spell-formulas.
In legends there were great sorcerers who controlled spell-formulas without spell rings, but those were just legends. Fiction, misidentification, or exaggeration — that was the accepted wisdom.
"……well……let's leave that for now……"
It wasn't acceptable at all, but Shin said it anyway.
There was no point in pressing Mei here — no answer was going to be forthcoming.
"In other words, you don't know why you could do that then. You can't freely use those incredible techniques……that's what you're saying."

"Exactly."
"Come to think of it, how is your physical condition? Any lingering effects from the wound?"
"Nope. Not at all."
"Healing that too was a spell-formula……right."
"Probably.
……What? Are you by any chance worried about me?"
"Don't…!
Idiot. What I'm worried about is what would happen if a Diva came to attack again."
He said that and stood from his seat —
"No need to run away all flustered~"
"I'm just going to get that thing."
"That thing?"
Without answering Mei's question, Shin left the room —
And when he came back, his hand held a single metal rod.
He placed it on the table and sat back down.
The thing that looked like a weapon, received from Lezerd last night.
There was no telling how seriously the patrol squad would take action. Mei could not freely use that power. Then for when the time came, he needed to keep something reliably usable close at hand.
Lezerd had called it a weapon.
But the form of it —
"……a rod……right……"
"……a rod……isn't it……"
The two stared at it carefully —
"— Oh! This one!"
The voice was Mei's.
"Doesn't it come apart in the middle!?"
"What?"
Told that, he looked more closely, and indeed, around the middle, a faint horizontal line seemed to be visible.
"A knife or something?"
Shin held it with both hands and pulled left and right —
Supyon!
With a sound lacking all suspense, exactly as Mei had imagined, it split into left and right halves.
And inside there were no silver gleaming blades — just hollow space.
"……"
"……"

The two sat in silence for a moment, turning it over and examining it.
"……tubes……right……"
"……tubes……isn't it……"
More silence.
"Well."
In an unnaturally bright tone, as if to wipe away a certain awkwardness, Mei said:
"Like, stuffing something inside and hitting with it. If you go all-out for five or six hundred hits, even a Diva would be done for!"
"You could just use an iron pipe for that."
Silence for the third time.
"……still, doesn't the surface pattern that looks like spell-runes hold the key?"
Forcing the words out somewhat, Shin joined the two halves back together again. When the decorative patterns were aligned, the seam was barely visible.
He tried tracing the silver band-like decoration — the part that resembled a spell-ring's spell-rune — with his finger.
No change was visible.
He separated them into two. Still no change. Joined them together again, traced the band backward, separated them again…
"……maybe there's a keyword needed."
"A keyword?"
Mei asked Shin's murmur.
"Yeah.
Among spell rings, there are types that won't activate unless you trace the engraved spell-rune and say a keyword."
"Ugh. Inconvenient."
"That's easy for you to say.
For lighting the ceiling it's fine if you accidentally touch a spell ring and activate it — no big deal. But if you accidentally touched and activated an offensive spell-formula, that would be a problem."
"Laugh it off and it's fine."
"Of course it's not.
Anyway.
If this is a weapon that produces some kind of effect through spell-formulas, there's a possibility you need that keyword."
"Hmm.
So what's the keyword?"
"If I knew, I wouldn't be struggling."
"Makes sense."
Mei picked it up, stared at it for a moment.

"……it looks like it uses a mix of Varta and Terror spell-formulas……"
That would mean a technique using the power of the moon Varta and the moon Terror.
"How can you tell? Something like that?"
"Because. It says so here."
Mei pointed at the band-like section. Looking carefully, all Shin could see there was spell-runes.
"……where?"
"Right here."
Mei traced a certain section of the spell-runes engraved in the band with her finger.
"Look. It says 'Varta' right there."
"……what?"
Shin frowned and raised his voice.
Mei, a little irritated, pointed to the same spot again.
"That's what I said. Here. 'Va-r-ta.' See."
"……no……you……that is……in other words……"
"What?"
Shin paused for a moment —
"By any chance……can you read spell-runes?"
"Ah. You're looking down on me.
I couldn't say it out loud… if you asked me to, that would be difficult, but I can tell what's written there, at least."
Said with the utmost ease.
Spell-runes have meaning. That was a matter of course.
These patterns create effects, and spell-formulas activate. That was exactly why spell rings with the same effect could be mass-produced, and why they yielded the same effect regardless of who used them.
Analyzing and manufacturing them was the work of researchers called spell-rune engineers. But those with such skills were only a tiny handful. To ordinary people, spell-runes were nothing but patterns.
But Mei claimed she could understand them.
"You're lying."
"It's true."
"But you were fascinated by spell rings before."
"That's different.
I wasn't fascinated by the spell-formulas or spell-runes themselves — I said it was interesting that they'd been made into a tool like that."
"……"
At that, Shin fell silent.

Before yesterday, he would have dismissed Mei's statement as more nonsense, more gibberish.
But having experienced all the unreasonable things of last night, he was inclined to lend some ear to what she said.
"Then try reading what's written."
No harm in trying. He said it as a test.
"Let's see……"
Mei turned the rod over, running her gaze along it for a moment.
"……read it."
"Read it out loud."
"Impossible."
"……so it was a lie. After all."
In a weary tone, he took it from Mei's hands.
Mei raised her eyebrows at that.
"It's true! It's just that, how to put it, it's difficult to put into words."
"Right, right."
"Ugh, that's infuriating!
……hmm……hmm……if I forced it into words……"
Mei folded her arms and furrowed her brows.
"Rene's……extreme? And Varta's extreme, twisted together……destroys Diva……?
Light……weapon……?
Something like that?"
"Extreme?"
He echoed the word and looked at the thing in his hands. Even looking again, the spell-runes still appeared to him as nothing but patterns.
"Yeah. Extreme. A specific place…… a special place but a specific place."
Shin absentmindedly traced the spell-rune with his finger.
"Not sure I understand but……
Rene's extreme, Varta's extreme……"
The spiral band.
"……fitted in a spiral……? Destroys the Diva? Light……"
Weapon — sword? Knife?
"Into a blade……?"
Vun.
It vibrated.
『— !?』
Shin and Mei both drew a small sharp breath.
"……hey! Just now——!"
"Try splitting it!"

"Right!"
Shin held it in both hands and pulled to either side.
White light spilled from what had been hollow space.
"……this is……!"
In a voice trembling with excitement — Shin pulled them all the way apart in one go!
Left and right.
From each of the left and right halves.
Blades of light were born.
But the length of the blades was palm-sized.
『Lame!』
Shin and Mei couldn't help but say it in unison.
"……wow. That's quite disappointing."
"Right~…… wanted at least sword-length for this kind of thing, yeah…… if it's a weapon like this, it doesn't have to get heavier just because it gets longer……"
The two stared at the meager blades.
A deep — sigh.
"……so in other words……
Dodge the Diva's spell-formula, dodge the claw attacks, dive into close range, and finish it with this, is that what this means……?"
"If you had the skill to pull off something like that, I feel like it would be faster to just use some other weapon."
"Wow. That's useless."
『……』
An awkward silence.
Shin pressed the blades together and restored it to one. When he separated it again, the blades of light had vanished.
"……."
Shin put it back together in one piece and quietly placed it on the table, then stood from his seat.
"……right. Let me get more tea.
You want some?"
"Oh. I'll help with something too."
Mei also rose from her seat —
Left behind was just —
The underwhelming weapon, sitting alone on the table.

The day of Neon, when the holiday ended.
Shin and Lezerd were heading together to Shin's house.

It was after the training school let out.
As it turned out, Shin had gone to the training school that day.
It meant leaving Mei at home alone, but whether Lezerd had given testimony, or whether the threatening phrase "international incident" had worked, somehow the patrol squad had agreed to place a guard there.
...Of course, if a Diva actually came to attack, one or two officers might not amount to much — but having Shin there would be just the same. ...That was frustrating, but it was the truth.
Then rather than staying home, going to school, hearing what Lezerd had to say, and gathering information about the Diva was more useful. Shin had made that judgment.
And after school. Without even needing to invite him, Lezerd had come to say: he had something to talk about and could he stop by the house?
Of course there was no reason to refuse.
The afternoon street showed its share of activity.
Lined-up houses. People going about the street. A horse-drawn carriage stopped at the roadside. A spell-driven automobile, the spell ring on its hood glinting in the soft afternoon sun, kicking up the dry road and raising a cloud of dust.
For Shin, it was the familiar, everyday scenery.
".....it's not a dream.....it wasn't.....is it....."
He murmured.
"What happened the night before last....."
No wonder the patrol squad didn't believe him. Even Shin, walking the usual road, felt that the whole thing was like a horribly unreal bad dream.
"If it were a dream, there would be no problem."
Lezerd, walking beside him, denied that possibility.
"But in fact, even now Jubias are monitoring us."
"What!?"
Told that, Shin looked around. He sent his eyes to the shadows of lampposts, buildings, and into the crowds, but couldn't spot anything of that kind.
"Finding them is probably impossible."
Without breaking stride, Lezerd said.
"Even I am only sensing the smell."
"I see....."
They themselves were being watched by those beasts called Jubias.
That naturally meant Mei was also being watched, and that she was for the time being unharmed. If the Diva had accomplished its goal of killing Mei, there would be no point in watching Shin and company.
Even if there was no immediate harm, knowing they were being followed by those things was naturally unpleasant.

"Then at the very least……isn't there some way to shake them off?"
"Impossible."
"……I mean, couldn't you do something about some mere beasts, you're supposed to be a Scale King lord……"
"'Some mere beasts,' you say, but they are military beasts. Do not underestimate them."
"……I suppose……"
He remembered someone saying something like: those things are akin to military dogs.
If you put it in human terms, shaking off the pursuit of military dogs was not something easily done — along those lines.
In any case, it was a fact that worrying about things that couldn't be helped was pointless. Shin changed his mood and switched subjects.
"……so……why did you help us?"
"That sort of thing — let's talk about it at the house, with that person included.
She's there, isn't she?
Otherwise we'll just end up repeating the same talk."
"Yes — that's true."
Shin said and fell silent. If the matter of the Diva was to wait until later, he couldn't think of what else to talk about with this Draguno who looked like a Hume.
"What I should rather say now is——"
It was from Lezerd's side that the conversation was brought up.
"What on earth she is."
"……right. Mei."
"Yes."
The golden eyes looked into Shin's.
"You understand it yourself, don't you.
That she is no ordinary Hume.
Then what is she?"
Force entered Lezerd's voice. But as if deflecting that force —
"Don't know."
All force was drained from Shin's voice.
"— I see. I don't suppose she told you all the truth either.
Then let me change the question.
What do you think she is?"
"No idea. Something like that. Doesn't matter."
"— What—"
Lezerd let out a surprised voice and stopped. Shin kept walking without caring.
Splattered with dust from a passing horse-drawn carriage, Lezerd finally came to his senses and hurried to catch up to Shin.
"Doesn't matter……you say……

Aren't you curious about her true identity?"
"Well, it's not that I'm completely uninterested.
But it's not something I can figure out by thinking, and more important right now is figuring out what to do about the Diva who will undoubtedly come to attack."
"……you mean that……?"
Lezerd looked into Shin's face and asked.
"What?"
"That what to do about the Diva is more urgent than what she really is.
She might not be a Hume. In fact, the odds of that are rather high.
Like me, she's changed to a Hume appearance with a spell-formula, and the transformation partially came undone when her life was in danger, temporarily causing the change in one arm and the release of power —
That's what I've been thinking."
"Hmm."
"No, um, 'hmm'……
If my hypothesis is correct and she isn't a Hume, then it has nothing to do with you.
There should be a way to either drive her out or run away yourself, but you're intentionally thinking about fighting the Diva.
— Why?"
"……it's sort of…… whatever she is, it doesn't matter."
Shin smiled wryly and said.
"It doesn't matter……?"
"Yeah. Whether Mei is a Hume or not, or if she's actually a dog or cat or some kind of monster…… basically whatever she might be.
You said if she's not a Hume it has nothing to do with me, but even if she were an ordinary Hume, it would still have nothing to do with me.
But see, how do I put it……from the point when I couldn't throw her out at first, I was already entangled in this. Me. In this whole situation.
And since I got entangled, I'm going to see it through.
That's all there is to it.
……even I think it's pretty stupid though."
Two days ago.
He had been shaken, and for a moment had forgotten Mei's existence, and as a result had nearly gotten her killed. That was the same as abandoning her.
That had burned itself into his chest as a deep sense of guilt. The fact that his attitude toward Mei had softened since then was also because of that.
Of course, right now Mei was impossibly fine.
If one were to speak of a victim, it would be Shin himself who was the victim caught up in this.

But thinking it over that way didn't make the weight in his chest go away.
The way to eliminate the bitter lump in his heart was probably just one thing.
To face it.
Not the Diva. His own heart.
To protect Mei, so that he could remain himself.
But that was, as Lezerd had said, synonymous with fighting the Diva.
"……is that how it is with Humes……"
"Who can say.
An ordinary person might choose a smarter way of doing things.
— So, that said.
Tell me your honest opinion.
……do you think it's possible to win? A Hume against a Diva?"
Asked, Lezerd was silent for a moment before:
"I don't know. I'm a Draguno.
But what I can certainly say is —
A Diva is the name of a race that lives on this Crosscadia, and it is a living being. Not a legendary demon of myth that fought the gods.
Meaning it is neither invincible nor immortal.
And you have allies."
"……that would be……nice……"
He murmured and looked up at the distant sky.
In the afternoon sky, the moons were not yet visible.

"— I'm home~"
"Oh."
The voice welcoming Shin home came from somewhere in the back.
Shin and Lezerd looked at each other involuntarily.
The watch officer standing guard at the entrance looked in to see what was going on, and Shin raised a hand to signal: nothing, it's fine.
"Is that……the Hume-style homecoming greeting?"
"Of course not."
He brushed off Lezerd's straightfaced question and headed toward the back. The location was the dining room — the place where the wall had been blown open.
He walked briskly down the hall and opened the door.
"Hey. What are you——"
He started to say, and froze.
Beyond the dining room was the kitchen. There were bowls and pots and frying pans and flour and salt and oil —

— Well, to put it simply, it was a mess.
"……what……are you doing?"
In the midst of that mess, Shin threw a cool question at Mei, who stood there in an apron with an uncomfortable expression.
"……wh……what……"
Mei averted her gaze with a red face for a moment.
"……well, um, you see, I was hungry, so I thought I'd make something to eat, and it ended up like this."
"Oh-ho."
Shin calmly looked around.
"It's not that yesterday's food I made was delicious, and you were frustrated at being beaten in cooking skill, and you were practicing all kinds of things and it ended up like this — that's not what happened, is it. Hmm."
"Ugh that's infuriating."
He'd hit the mark.

"……well, whatever. Anyway I brought a guest.
Talk first. Sit down."
"……mbu……"
Grumbling with a pouty face, Mei washed her dirty hands and took off her apron and sat at the table.
"The kitchen being like that means I can't even brew tea, but, well, have a seat."
He offered Lezerd the chair across from Mei and looked around for his own chair.
The wall where a hole had been opened — filled temporarily with soil as emergency repair. He spotted the wooden crate placed against it to reinforce the temporary fix. He dragged it over as a substitute chair and sat at the side of the table.
"— First, introductions. Well, me you can skip."
Shin first pointed at Mei.
"This is Mei. Unknown identity. That's all."
"Hold on."
Mei immediately interjected.
"What's with that sloppy introduction. I don't feel any sincerity."
"If you're unhappy, introduce yourself."
"Fine. Watch me give an amazing self-introduction unlike any you've heard before, and be amazed."
"What kind of self-introduction is that?"
Mei cleared her throat with a prim face.
"Ummm, I'm Mei."
She opened with a cheerful smile —

Froze like that for a moment.
"……um……um……that is……
I don't have memories from a while back……"
"Wow. I'm amazed. Your introduction was the same as mine."
"……be quiet……"
Shin responded in a deadpan tone, and Mei murmured with a red face.
"And this is Lezerd."
Shin pointed at Lezerd anyway.
"Exchange student from the Scale King country."
"Lezerd Gynos Rezizanol."
"So then."
Shin turned to Lezerd, gesturing toward Mei.
"She's like this, so aside from knowing she's being targeted by a Diva, we don't know anything.
Whereas you seem to have all kinds of information.
If there's anything you know, tell us."
"……that said……"
"Don't pretend to know nothing.
Hey, Mei, that."
"Here you go."
Mei handed Shin the underwhelming weapon she'd had tucked behind her trousers.
"With this you can even kill a demon. You said that and gave this to me. You haven't asked for it back.
You wouldn't do something like that knowing nothing, would you?"
"Were you able to figure out how to use it?"
"I think…"
Shin held it in both hands.
"……Rene's extreme, Varta's extreme fitted in a spiral…… become a blade of light to annihilate the Diva……"
Vun.
Confirming the small vibration that occurred, Shin pulled the two halves apart.
Born again was the same palm-sized blade of light.
"Oh."
Lezerd let out an admiring voice.
"You actually managed to activate it."
"Yeah."
Shin answered vaguely.
With Lezerd's position still unclear, it was probably better to keep silent for now about the fact that Mei had "read" the meaning inscribed in it.

"I was the one who read it, me who read it."
From beside him, Mei effortlessly destroyed Shin's plan.
"You can read it."
"Or more like, I can at least understand the meaning."
"Well. That's impressive."
Whether impressed, complimenting, or harboring some motive — from Lezerd's unchanging expression nothing could be read.
"……leaving that aside, let's get back to the topic."
Shin restored the tube to one piece, sheathing the blades.
"So, what do you know? About Mei, and about the Diva?"
"Nothing."
"……come on……"
"You seem to be under a misapprehension, but I didn't help you two.
I interfered with the Diva's actions."
"With the Diva?"
At the unexpected answer, Shin's eyes went wide.
"Yes.
In the battle fifty years ago, we Draguno and the Diva fought particularly fiercely against one another.
The lingering resentment from that time, honestly, cannot be said to have been fully severed."
"……but that was fifty years ago……"
"Not 'a full fifty years,' but 'a mere fifty years.'
Compared to you Humes, we Draguno and Divas have lifespans more than twice as long.
What for you would be the era of your grandfather or great-grandfather is, for us, the era of our fathers.
There is no way this is forgotten."
"I suppose."
"That is how it is."
Lezerd nodded.
Shin couldn't quite grasp it — but if an actual Draguno was saying so, that must be how it was.
"I hadn't heard that a Diva was in this city.
To begin with, they are not cooperative about international exchange with other countries and are hardly supposed to visit other nations.
But I caught the scent of a Diva.
Shindred. I told you, didn't I? Not a very pleasant smell.

When Mei here was attacked by the Diva, the smell probably transferred to her. Which then transferred further to Shindred."
"You caught that smell — and while keeping an eye on me, an actual Diva showed up, is that it."
"Exactly.
The previous king of the Diva cooperated with international exchange between nations, but the current king is not only uncooperative — he openly displays the attitude that the Diva ought to be the rulers of the world — so we too are on guard.
Taking that situation into account.
When I tracked the smell and went to look, you two were being attacked by a Diva.
So I, without knowing the circumstances, tried to stop the Diva……
But in that situation, there was also the possibility that the Diva would ignore me and attack you. So I gave you that spell-formula sword, Shindred.
That is the whole story.
Since things haven't been resolved, please keep that with you for a while."
"Clan……blade……? Spell-formula blade……that's what it means.
A rather grand name for…… no disrespect, but it's kind of underwhelming, isn't it."
He said it while fiddling with it between his fingers.
"Well, originally it is a weapon we used in the previous war, for use against Divas.
Of course I've never used it, but apparently it has something to do with destroying Diva blood.
I've heard that the form and size of the blade changes depending on the user's image and magical power.
Naturally, now that the war is over it's a useless relic. I was just carrying it from a friend as a kind of good-luck charm."
"Oh-ho. So in other words."
Hearing that, Mei looked at Shin sideways.
"The underwhelming thing isn't the weapon, it's underling number two's magical power."
"Not at all. Nothing of the sort.
As I said, originally it is our weapon.
If it's a Hume, there will be those who can't produce a blade at all. The fact that you can produce one is impressive in itself. Even if it is underwhelming."
"Don't keep saying underwhelming!"
"What are you saying, Shindred. You said it first."
"……ugh……!
……well…… that aside, but then, would this actually work as a weapon if I used it?"
"If a blade can be produced at all, it should be better than nothing."
"……r……really……?"

Honestly, that wasn't very reassuring. Imagining himself facing a Diva with what was underwhelming — no, a blade that was somewhat too short, was enough to make him feel despairingly close to tears.
If it was a Draguno's weapon, it might be better for Lezerd to have it, but saying that out loud would feel like relying on him and taking the easy way out, and he disliked that.
Reluctantly, Shin kept it with him.
"Also, the fact that a Diva appeared in this city has been reported to my country."
Lezerd said.
"There will probably be some kind of action taken before too long.
But there is also the possibility that the Diva will move before that time — or even before that."
Which means we need to prepare as much as we can."
"The best possible preparation……meaning?"
"Let's see. Regarding that, perhaps we can talk over it while enjoying the cooking skill of Shindred, which Mei here rates highly."
"……meaning……you're getting hungry and want a meal……"
"I'm saying that those who join forces should deepen communication."
"……."
At this rate, until the incident was resolved, Shin was looking at worrying about the cost of food on top of the Diva attack.
He suppressed a sigh, but stood from his seat all the same.
First and foremost, to clean up the disastrously scattered kitchen.

Hyu.
The wooden sword's blade cut through the night air.
The small garden behind the house.
A faint smell of the lush weeds drifting faintly.
Ignoring the gaze he felt from somewhere, Shin was repeating practice swings for what was by now an uncountable number of times.
Humans were something, all things considered.
Shin thought so sometimes.
Since Lezerd had pointed out the Jubias' surveillance, within just a few days Shin had somehow come to sense their presence.
Being monitored.
As he kept that awareness, the ability had come to him all at once. To detect it.
A smell.
The way Lezerd had described it — he felt like he understood what that meant.

He couldn't see them. He couldn't hear footsteps. But — he knew. The presence of the other.
In practical terms it was the movement of the wind, drifting smells, slight sounds, shadows grazing the edge of his vision — all at barely detectable levels. He was unconsciously integrating those and capturing what could only be called a presence.
...Well, there was also the option that it was all just paranoid delusion, but he was deliberately choosing not to think about that.
For a while now, Shin and the others had been devoting themselves to battle preparations.
— The fastest method would be to steal spell rings and weapons from the training school, but……that course of action was obviously off the table.
Could he even steal things that were supposedly under tight management? Even if he could, could he bring them in without the patrol officers watching the house noticing? If discovered he'd naturally be caught, and if that happened, he could end up suspected of being the culprit behind the spell-formula incident.
So out of necessity.
They bought large quantities of spell rings from various places and gave them to Mei. The kind sold everywhere as daily necessities. The kind for generating fire for camp cooking. The kind for making a small portable light. Et cetera et cetera.
In sizes ranging from wristband to large enough to fit Shin's whole head.
Mei claimed she would rewrite the engraved spell-runes and convert them into weapons.
Was that even possible. Shin had been deeply skeptical, but Lezerd had proposed it, and Mei had said she could.
Even so, spell rings were metal. The spell-runes too were inscribed into them. Even if Mei had the ability of a spell-rune engineer, processing would require tools, time, and skill.
And so for the past several days she had been spending the whole day every day scraping and filing away with a gold saw and files.
She had ruined any number of spell rings, and Shin was betting that not a single one had been successfully powered up. Because whenever he asked how it was going, she would always try to change the subject in annoyance.
Lezerd would come from time to time and talk with Mei about what seemed to be spell ring matters — or so Shin believed. He had tried listening once from nearby, but it was completely incomprehensible conversation, so since then he had made a point of not going close.
What Lezerd was doing when he wasn't doing that, Shin didn't know.
He'd said he had all kinds of things to do……
And what Shin himself could do —

In the end, was nothing but training himself.
Training when he came home.
First, the basics: practice swings.
And throwing knife practice.
A Diva could fly. If attacked with spell-formulas from overhead where no sword could reach, no matter how skilled he was with a sword it would be meaningless. Projectile practice was essential.
Then imaginary combat training, and practice handling the spell-formula sword Lezerd had given him.
Though of course, he couldn't actually use the real spell-formula sword.
The guard patrol officers were keeping watch near the house. Practice swings and imaginary training could pass as practice for physical education class, but if what he was swinging around was a strange glowing weapon, the story would be different.
Instead, what he used were two short wooden sticks.
In his mind, he summoned from memory the Diva's form.
The inhuman form looking down on him, easily a full head taller.
Just that alone, dread and pressure were born within him.
He suppressed those and moved the imaginary Diva.
That speed with which it had struck Mei.
The range of its arm. Its stride. Its beating wings.
In his imagination, Shin dodged the arm's blow, stepped in, thrust in the blade.
— Humans grow more with a target before them —
Shin was experiencing the words of a physical training instructor in practice.
In sword practical classes, Shin had previously been taking three out of five bouts with instructors, but lately he was taking all of them.
Thanks to that the instructors disliked him more and more — but.
His concentration was completely different. He could see the opponent's movements clearly. He could predict where the next attack was going to come from.
He could tell for himself that he was rapidly improving.
That's why he thought it. Humans were really something.
But even so.
In his imagination, Shin had still not once won against the imaginary Diva —

And so the days flowed on for a while.

"……I'm afraid things have become a little……inconvenient……"

Thick, sticky sweat covered the forehead of the young Lord Mayor when they met face-to-face for the first time in nearly two weeks.
It seemed like this was not a particularly pleasant topic.
In the curtain-drawn room, Burgiolas, messenger of the Diva, quietly faced the Lord Mayor.
As the Lord Mayor sat in prolonged silence, the Lord Mayor began speaking rapidly.
"You see, someone like myself who is called 'Lord' Mayor, this doesn't carry the same meaning as 'liege lord' in the old sense.
It is not hereditary, I was publicly chosen and approved by the Central Council, and I have been entrusted with the management and operation of this area — so in practical terms I don't hold the authority and independence of the lords of old, that is the reality of it……of course there does exist a certain degree of autonomous administrative rights, but that, how shall I say it, even that falls far short of omnipotent……meaning in brief, one might say the administrative rights of the city's political operations have been entrusted to me under various constraints……"
"To put it briefly."
Seeing that the Lord Mayor's "brief" was showing no sign of becoming brief at all, Burgiolas opened his mouth.

At that, the Lord Mayor stiffened and fell silent in an almost comical way.
"The 'limit' you mentioned before — that time has come. Is that the situation?"
"……y……yes!"
The Lord Mayor nodded repeatedly and said, even faster:
"Actually today there was a report from Central, saying they had received information that a Diva was in this city! Ah! Not you! Apparently, a Draguno who has been an exchange student in this city sent a formal protest to the Draguno country saying they had encountered a Diva and been in danger of being harmed, and it seems that the Central has received this and talk of sending an investigator here has come up!"
"— The Draguno —"
Burgiolas murmured.
He had known of the Draguno's presence from Kelmizo's report. He had expected some kind of action sooner or later — but to come at it through political proper channels. Or was that how it looked, while actually harboring some other motive?
"Y! Yes!"
The Lord Mayor wiped the greasy sweat from his forehead with his sleeve.
"If Central's investigator were to learn that you are here, I thought that would cause problems for your country as well, so that's why I came to consult with you on what might be done!"
In other words —

Having received a bribe and been allowing a Diva to stay unofficially, if this was discovered, their own position would be in danger, so please leave. That was presumably the gist.
Then.
"The reason we came here was something I stated at the beginning.
There was one who broke discipline. They are now hiding in this town. We will settle it ourselves — that is what I said."
"Y, yes! I know it very well!
So……if something should come up, the patrol squad on our side will handle it!"
Oh. Interesting. Please let me see you handle it then.
Without letting it show on his face, murmuring in the depths of his chest, Burgiolas said:
"……are you sure you want to leave it to you?"
"Yes!"
At Burgiolas's question, the Lord Mayor's expression brightened.
"Understood.
Returning home without completing the mission is undesirable, but being obstinate here and having it breed ill-will between nations would be putting the cart before the horse.
Then we will arrange to quietly depart at the earliest opportunity, today or tomorrow."
"I'm so grateful for your understanding!"
To the Lord Mayor making no attempt to hide his evident relief, Burgiolas said in the same tone:
"I have caused the Lord Mayor various inconveniences."
"Not at all!"
"As for the one-tenth of the currency previously provided — I would ask that you retain that as compensation for your trouble."
"……huh……?"
The Lord Mayor's mouth fell open.
"……what does that……?"
"While it is regrettable that the mission was not completed, upon your returning the trunk, we will begin preparations to return home."
Burgiolas said coolly.
He was saying: if you're backing out now, return nine-tenths of what was given.
Honestly, giving even a single small coin to this cowardly good-for-nothing Hume who backs out because Central gave a little push was a waste, but well, let's call it hush money.
"……i……is that so……"

The Lord Mayor, utterly terrified by Burgiolas's very presence, could hardly resist. And one-tenth was still plenty of money.
The Lord Mayor made some stumbling appropriate farewell with a face mixed with disappointment and fear, and left the room.
"— And so it goes."
Burgiolas, left behind, raised his voice.
Toward the one standing by on the terrace, beyond the closed curtains.
"Two days after I have departed, wait.
After you have waited, carry out the mission.
It matters little if things become somewhat more of a commotion. But — make sure it is accomplished.
When finished, come back."
"Your will."
The one who answered was, of course — Kelmizo's voice.
The mission — it went without saying. The assassination of Mei.
The story being told: Burgiolas had infiltrated the Hume city in secret to pursue a dangerous Diva criminal who had fled into it, but was forced to withdraw from the city due to Draguno political interference. Afterward, the Diva hiding in the city goes on a rampage for some reason. Burgiolas might have been able to restrain them had he still been there, but by then he was already gone, and as a result several Humes got caught in the crossfire.
That was the script, in essence.
Of course, among those Humes caught in the crossfire was the target that was supposed to be disposed of in the first place.
After that, you wait for Kelmizo to return home, pick someone from among the Diva criminals who looks vaguely like him, set them up as the culprit and execute them as a show.
When that happened, what sort of face the cowardly Lord Mayor here would make — that alone was what Burgiolas could be said to regret not being able to witness.

The moon was out.
Gazing vaguely at the clear night sky, the watch patrol officer stifled what was by now an uncountable yawn.
He was bored.
The incident of offensive spell-formula use that had occurred about two weeks ago.
The person thought to be deeply connected to that was the resident of this house, Shindred Kairam.
But even through the alternating watches, nothing abnormal had occurred.

……Of course, he wasn't hoping for a troublesome incident to happen.
The patrol personnel had eventually been reduced from two to one, leaving no one to pass the time talking with.
While he told himself this was the job, that didn't make the boredom go away — and as a result, the watch officer stifled his yawn any number of times.
He looked slowly around at regular intervals.
A blue night sky. The moon hanging over it. Bats flying around. Lined lampposts. No figures of people passing on the street, the garden trees standing as black darkness.
Faint light leaked from the windows of the houses, and the scent of dinner drifted through the night air.
And then —
Something moved in the edge of his vision. From the shadow of one garden tree to another.
By the time he reflexively turned, there was already nothing there.
He hadn't seen it clearly, but — given the size, it was probably a dog or something.
Stray dogs sometimes wandered around this area looking for household scraps.
Thinking that, he turned his gaze back —
……?
He felt something off.
He had just seen something different from usual. He had a strong feeling of that.
But — he couldn't tell what that something was.
He looked around again. The nighttime road. The nighttime city.
From a distant place, a shadow crossed again.
Given the size, it was not a person. But just now — was that a dog? Really?
Cold sweat beaded on his back.
He was alone on watch here right now. The earlier shift had finished dinner and taken over just a little while ago. Until the next shift change was a long time.
If something happened now, what would happen?
He found himself thinking that briefly.
If he traced the signal spell ring hanging at his waist and sent a light signal into the sky, that was supposed to bring rescue — that had been the arrangement.
But from the Central Police Station to here was a considerable distance. How long would it take for reinforcements to arrive?
In the end, until then, he would have to manage somehow himself.
Coming to that realization anew, half unconsciously, the officer reached for the sword at his waist.
Of course it was a real blade, not blunted. The guard had spell rings engraved in it, and removing the safety and using it would fire intense cold directly where the sword's tip

was pointed. A guaranteed frostbite hit. It was equipment meant to slow the enemy's movements and arrest them.
But against someone who could casually use offensive spell-formulas, how far could he fight with just this one sword?
— In reality, though.
Such thoughts were unnecessary worry on his part.
When he felt wind and a presence on his back, the diving Diva — Kelmizo's hooked claw had, from behind, without giving him time to turn, torn through his heart.
"——! ——!"
Without even knowing why. Instead of a scream, black blood gushed from the officer's mouth.
Whether his hand traced the spell ring at his waist by the accident of a flailing motion, or whether it was intentional —
Either way, it didn't change his fate.
The spell-rune engraved in the spell ring glowed a pale yellow, and from it, a streak of light shot into the night sky.
It gave birth to a single bright red star shining in the night sky.
The emergency signal requesting rescue.
Kelmizo swung his arm and threw the already-convulsing Hume to the ground.
He gazed at the red glow in the sky and murmured:
"It matters little if things become somewhat more of a commotion — that was it."
His gaze returned to a single house before him.

That night.
The movement of Burgess Central Police Station became suddenly frantic.
They had confirmed the launch of an emergency signal.
Shortly after, from the garage on the side of the police station, several recently deployed spell-driven automobiles burst out one after another, spell rings on their hoods glinting in the moonlight.
In them rode patrol officers with what was called counter-spell equipment — officers carrying defensive spell rings. Their number exceeded twenty.
It was not an excessive number. After all, the opponent was presumably the reckless fool who had casually fired offensive spell-formulas inside the city.
But they did not know.
That their reckless fool was not human.

White fish cream soup. Salad scattered with bits of cheese, and crispy chicken sauté spiced with pepper and lemon. Plus water and a few slices of bread.
It was the exact same menu as what Mei had first cooked for him.
"……mmm……kuuuuuuuu……!"
Taking one spoonful of cream soup, Mei made a blatantly disgruntled face.
"What's wrong? Does it not suit your palate?"
Shin asked with an innocent face. By the way, tonight's dinner was one he had made.
"It's delicious! Any problem with that!"
Apparently so frustrated at being beaten in cooking by Shin, she responded with a backwards irritation, a disgruntled expression on her face, but shoveling food into her mouth regardless.
There had been a time before when she had stubbornly insisted "it doesn't taste good," and Shin had taken the food away saying "if it tastes bad, don't eat it."
Since then, Mei had come to be honestly cantankerous.
About two weeks since they had met. Whether he had grown accustomed to her attitude, Shin paid no attention and put food in his mouth —
— !
Both of them stopped at the exact same moment.
They looked at each other and stood up.
They had sensed it. That the time had come — that an unwelcome guest had arrived.
Immediate action.
Both were already in casual clothes easy to move in. The not-too-bulky spell-formula sword was tucked at Shin's back waist.
Planning for exactly this kind of situation, he grabbed the iron rod he'd borrowed from the construction materials yard that he'd placed near the table, rushed to the wall, pressed his palm against something that looked like no more than a small mirror, and said:
"It's here."
Just that one word.
In that instant, the mirror on the other side of his pressed palm seemed to ripple for a moment.
It was something Lezerd had left, and pressing it like this supposedly conveyed to him that something had happened.
He turned and headed for the living room door. Most of the spell rings Mei had made were in the other room. He was going to get them — but:
"No good! We won't make it!"
Mei's words stopped him. Before he would have snapped back: what are you talking about. But now, somehow, he understood. Mei was sensing something.
"What do we do!?"

"This way!"
Mei ran to the living room window and threw it open. Shin figured it out and kicked off the floor —
The two jumped out through the window, and at that exact instant.
Don!
The shock wave shook the house.
Their balance broken, the two tumbled in the weed-covered back garden.
They turned, and before their eyes —
Bwa!
Crimson flames billowed from the window!
"—!"
Shin's expression contorted.
The Diva had launched a matter-destruction spell-formula from outside to tear through the center of the house, opening a hole through each room, and then released a fire spell to the same points.
Of course Shin didn't understand it to that level, but looking at the size of the rising flames he understood clearly.
Just how monstrous the thing he was about to face was.
— Gee!
Right beside him, an unearthly cry.
Right before Shin's turned eyes, a Jubia's wide-open mouth. Countless fangs lined up inside.
His body had already moved. He drove the tip of the iron pipe in his hand into the open mouth!
Gygya!
Screaming, the Jubia flew back. Better than a wooden sword, but his weapon was just an iron rod. He didn't know if he'd finished it.
……ru……ruRuRuRu guruu……
Using that as a cue, threatening growls rose up from all four directions.
The Jubias had the two of them completely surrounded.
— This is bad —
A single bead of sweat ran down Shin's cheek.
Not because of the surrounded situation itself. Because of the himself who was starting to be afraid.
Memories surfaced.
One night not long ago. The time when he'd been completely herded into a trap and surrounded.
Even if his head thought otherwise, the fear that had settled at the bottom of his heart slowly raised its head, trying to rob his body of its freedom.

He could tell himself that he was tense and had extra unnecessary force in him. If he was like this against the Jubias, what would happen when the Diva appeared?
"Mei! What spell rings do you have!?"
As if to shake off the fear he felt, Shin raised his voice.
"Two sets!"
Immediately.
The bracelets she had on both wrists were not there for fashion. Prepared so she could respond no matter when an attack came, they were modified by Mei — two constituting one set, two sets total.
Not being able to bring out the spell rings she'd left in the other room was painful. With only this much fighting power, what could they accomplish?
……Speaking of fighting power, what had happened to the watch patrol officer? There had definitely been one stationed at the front entrance. But from the way the Diva was attacking so brazenly, probably by now —
Thinking about it was depressing, but now was not the time to sink over that.
— Gy ah!
Three Jubias cried out and simultaneously lunged at the two of them.
"Leave it to me!"
He shouted and swung the iron rod.
He could see the trajectory of the beasts who had kicked off the ground and leaped. His weapon swept through the void as if connecting their paths.
He caught the first one's jaw with a sideways strike, using that impact to slightly redirect the flow of the weapon.
He struck the second one's body, and riding the weight of the follow-through swing, he kicked off the ground and thrust at the third one that had been coming from beside Mei.
……The fact that the weapon was just an iron rod does somewhat ruin the visual, but.
"Oh. Not bad for an underling number two."
Whether praising or teasing — he had no room to care about Mei's words.
His body moved. For now. But he still couldn't shake the fear, and he was somewhat slower than usual — and somewhat slower than he had imagined. That was frustratingly inefficient.
He gripped the iron rod, swept his gaze around the Jubias as if warning them off —
The Jubias cried. — They were coming. Again.
That instant. Mei moved.
"Over here!"
She shouted and leaped sideways, vaulting the hedge. Without listening to anything Shin followed.
As if drawn, a Jubia leaped in pursuit.
Immediately.

Zon!
A sound of shaking space traveled.
The space where Shin and Mei had just been — and where the pursuing Jubia was leaping.
It rippled spherically for barely an instant.
But in that one moment, the body of the Jubia that had been there had transformed.
It traced a gentle arc and fell at Shin and Mei's feet, and the Jubia that had been alive just moments before shattered to pieces and scattered, turned into gray fragments.
A spell-formula had been fired.
There was no need to think about who had done it.
Shin looked up. At the sky.
A somewhat wider area facing the street. His gaze ahead. The massive wings finally descended to earth.

The winged form of death.
Diva.

It matters little if things become somewhat more of a commotion.
Burgiolas had said that.
That meant — in a way — make things at least somewhat of a commotion.
From the nuance of what Burgiolas had said, and the scenario he was probably picturing in his head, Kelmizo had gathered as much.
He was going to deliberately stir up a commotion, and have it be a story of: if not for the Draguno's unnecessary political interference, things wouldn't have come to this.
That was why, even when the Hume he had disposed of at the front entrance launched what appeared to be a rescue signal, he hadn't minded.
Let the reinforcements come. All the better to make things spectacular.
Spectacular — burning down the entire area in a sea of flames, that was one option he had considered, but he thought better of it.
Too indiscriminate an attack would make it difficult to confirm whether the primary target had been taken out.
Spreading the commotion could wait until after what needed to be done was done.
A bundle of Humes charging at him posed no problem.
The single Draguno who had appeared before — if there was only one, there was plenty Kelmizo could do.
But what he didn't understand — was this one.
Kelmizo was staring at the Hume female — no, the one in that form.
The one who had to be killed.
But what was this one?

About two weeks ago, having suffered a wound that should have been fatal, and yet having fully healed without even an interval, and having wielded mighty spell-formulas.
And now again, dodging every spell-formula that was supposed to have been surprise attacks. As if she knew ahead of time where each attack was coming.
If this one could make use of the power she possessed, his chances of winning were slim.
But there was an opening.
The Hume male accompanying her seemed to be something this one cared about. If he used that, he could land a blow.
If he took her head clean off. Or crushed her heart. No matter who, nothing could survive that — unless they were truly a god or demon out of legend.
Either way —
He would kill her.
That was his mission.
With that resolve, Kelmizo stepped forward.
"— Why?"
At the same time, the Hume male spoke, and Kelmizo involuntarily stopped.
"Why do you target Mei — this person!?"
Asked that, Kelmizo's expression tightened slightly.
An unpleasant question. Of course because that was his mission. He hadn't been told the details — not for someone at his level. As for the reason —
"— What does it matter —"
He said it and Kelmizo kicked off the ground.

His muscles were cramping, sweat beading.
Facing down the Diva in a fighting stance, Shin's heart was captive to fear.
After landing, the Diva didn't move.
It kept staring this way — no, at Mei who was half a step behind. Probably Shin wasn't even on its radar.
Even so the fear and pressure he received exceeded his expectations.
It was all he could do to suppress the urge to tremble in every muscle. Whether he would be able to move properly when the fight started — honestly he had no confidence.
It wasn't rushing at them right away because it was probably wary of Mei's power. But her power was not reliable right now.

The spell-formula sword — he wouldn't draw it yet. Let it think his only weapon was the iron rod, and at the right moment, let go of it. Catch it off guard, dive into close range, and settle it with that.
That was roughly the plan Shin had in mind.
On top of being a rough plan from the start, with his body barely moving reliably in this state, could he actually do something like that?
But.
He would do it. Absolutely.
Even trying to motivate himself with words in his head, the cold sweat wouldn't stop.
How long had they been staring each other down?
After a short stretch that felt like eternity, the Diva took one step.
"— Why?"
It was at the same time that Shin spoke up, trying to drive away his own fear.
The Diva's movement paused for a moment.
Suppressing the trembling in his voice, Shin raised his voice:
"Why do you target Mei — this person!?"
The Diva's expression changed slightly. Whether it was mockery or pity — Shin couldn't tell.
"— What does it matter —"
— There's no need to tell a dead man —
That was how the words sounded to Shin's ears.
At the same time the Diva kicked off the ground!
Most likely a hooked claw attack! Step forward to close the range, entangle it with the iron rod. If it came to close quarters, the other side shouldn't be able to use spell-formulas carelessly either.
The method of response was built up in an instant as an image in Shin's mind —
But.
His body wouldn't move.
— What is going on!?
He clenched his back teeth.
The Diva was closing in.
The inhuman form filled his vision. Steeling himself to die, clenching his back teeth —
— The Diva suddenly changed course sideways.
He instantly understood what had happened.
Mei, behind him, had moved sideways. To draw the Diva's attention.
A chill ran down Shin's spine. Memory surfaced in an instant.
The Diva slipping past him. The girl, struck by the claw, flying through the air. Himself, unable to do anything.
The scene he'd witnessed two weeks ago.

Was he going to see that image again?
But this time there was no guarantee that Mei's power would conveniently activate. No, the Diva itself already knew about her power. This time it would try to bring her certain death in a single blow.
— I won't let it —
Before he knew it.
Shin was roaring.
Roaring, and lunging at the Diva.
His body — moved.
Gigyari!
The hooked claw received a blow.
"Guh!?"
Apparently having been entirely contemptuous of Shin, the Diva let out a small voice of surprise.
Before the claw could wrap around him, Shin pulled back his weapon, and without giving the other time to recover, thrust again. Stepping in, aiming for the wing. If the thin wing membrane, even an iron rod could pierce it.
There was no way a hooked claw counter could make it in time.
Zo!
A dull sensation of resistance.
The tip of the thrust iron rod fell just short of the Diva's wing — stopped by a shield of light that had appeared in thin air.
The fact that it was a defensive spell-formula activated by the spell-rune engraved in the Diva's leather armor and the movement of the wingtip — Shin had no way to see through that — but.
He had failed. That much he understood.
Ruaaaa!
The Diva's roar. Almost simultaneously.
"Left!"
Mei's voice reached Shin's ear.
Without thinking, Shin leaped hard to the left. The iron rod flowing from his right hand —
GaGin!
With a vibration, it was cut close to halfway through and fell as iron fragments.
The Diva had set a spell-formula at the spot Shin had been, and Mei had sensed it and warned him.
He was saved. But with this, his weapon was now mostly useless.
The Diva charged toward Shin! Was it trying to deal with this nuisance first? It extended its right claw —

"— You!"
Mei took some distance, held out her right hand, and traced the bracelet-type spell ring with her left hand as if turning it.
A massive flame born — seemingly from her palm — scorched the night air and aimed for the Diva!
……Of course, Shin was also on that side.
The Diva kicked off the ground and simultaneously beat its wings, jumping far backward to dodge.
Shin too —
"Uwaauu!?"
Somehow dodged while his nose was singed by the heat.
The flame that missed hit the garden tree ahead, instantly charing leaves and bark, exposing the white wood to moonlight.
He didn't know what or how Mei had modified it, but the output was unbelievable for something she'd tinkered with from a camping spell ring.
— Are you trying to kill me too!?
He wanted to say a word of complaint, but had no room for that.
Gee, ru, Ruru!
As the Diva roared, small shadows ran at the edges of his vision.
The surrounding Jubias — lunging toward Shin and Mei!
"Stay back!"
Mei used spell rings and scattered flames indiscriminately. Grass burned, trees burned, numerous Jubias took direct hits and fell —
And then someone's scream arose.
Shin noticed for the first time. That there were a number of human silhouettes at some distance.
The local residents had noticed the disturbance and came to see what was happening.
Making this much of a spectacle, of course that would happen when you thought about it.
"Mei! Don't go wild! There are people there!"
Shin called out to Mei. But.
"Fools who come to watch deserve it!"
Back came an answer befitting a self-described villain.
The Diva kicked off the ground. This time heading for — Mei.
Shin batted away a leaping Jubia with the shortened iron rod and moved to aid Mei.
Mei released flames at the Diva. The Diva leaped sideways, dodging — and changed course toward Shin!
The range closed in an instant. The claw flashed.
Gimu!

That one blow that hadn't yet built up full speed, Shin barely received with the shortened iron rod.
He thought he'd be pushed all the way through, but the Diva withdrew the claw once, then immediately without pause launched a second, third attack one after another.
— Something is odd —
A warning voice in Shin's mind.
The Diva's attacks had dropped in speed and power compared to earlier. That was exactly why he was managing to hold on even with the shortened iron rod.
Of course even so he was being pushed back — but.
Ringing clashes of steel. Shin was being pushed back half a step — and in the edge of his vision he caught sight of Mei rushing toward him. She was probably trying to support him.
— So that's it!
He perceived the Diva's aim.
The Diva was still wary of Mei's power.
It was driving himself into a corner to lure Mei into range and finish her in one stroke.
— Am I bait!?
"Don't come! Mei!"
Shin raised his voice. She reflexively stopped. He felt certain he heard the Diva click its tongue.
A claw strike came. The speed was different from before.
He barely received it with the iron rod — and was pressed down and tumbled.
The remains of the iron rod were knocked from Shin's hand.

To be honest, Kelmizo was a little surprised.
At none other than the Hume male who came at him.
Two or so weeks ago when he'd encountered him, a Hume who had been scared and could barely even move.
And now here he was, iron rod in hand, coming at Kelmizo.
Good talent for a Hume. He had very nearly managed to land a blow on Kelmizo.
If this Hume grew for a few more years and got proper equipment, he might become a warrior who could fight evenly against Kelmizo.
But for now, he fell short.
And Kelmizo had no intention of giving this Hume a future.
Finishing him in one blow was possible, but Kelmizo needed this male to serve as an anchor for the target — the female.
The target, for some reason, was not using the power she had shown before, and was generating flames with the shabby tool the Humes used — a spell ring.

Was this some kind of tactic? Like trying to make Kelmizo let his guard down?
But with power like that, there was no need for such petty tricks.
Then was there some reason she couldn't use the power now? Or was there a limit to how many times she could use it?
Either way, he could not afford to take it lightly. Even without that power, the fact that she was no ordinary Hume was certain.
The spell-formulas Kelmizo launched were being read — but that didn't mean she could see the future. Otherwise she wouldn't have taken that blow from Kelmizo that first time.
In other words —
To defeat her, it had to be through direct attack, not spell-formulas.
He knocked aside the persistently attacking male with a claw strike. The shabby iron rod flew out of his hand.
He turned to face the female. Warned by the male, she had stopped. Her range was slightly beyond the hooked claw's reach. If only the bothersome male's words hadn't been there, he could have gotten close enough to behead her in one blow.
But there was still a way.
— Ryu, guo!
Kelmizo roared. To human ears it sounded like nothing but a battle cry, but it was a high-speed spell incantation with language compression.
The target point was behind the female. Produce flames there. The opponent would sense it, but to dodge she would have no choice but to jump forward.
Namely — toward Kelmizo.
But the female's action betrayed Kelmizo's prediction.
She twisted her left hand, pointed it backward — at the space where the spell-formula had been set — and said:
"Negative Agar."
The bracelet-type spell ring on her arm glowed jet black.
A band of light sped to envelop the space Kelmizo had targeted, and disappeared —
That was all.
".....Neutralized.....!?"
Kelmizo exclaimed in astonishment.
No doubt about it. His own spell-formula had been neutralized effortlessly.
Not defending against one that had activated. Preventing it from activating.
In an instant she had understood what kind of structure the spell-formula aimed at her was composed of, and deployed the neutralizing spell.
Even Kelmizo himself, with overwhelming power compared to Humes, couldn't do such a thing.
— This is just like —

The words he couldn't say before Burgiolas, Kelmizo murmured again in the depths of his heart.

— Just Like The Power Of Our King —

He stood there momentarily stunned —
Something he sensed from the side pulled Kelmizo back to reality.
Looking that way, the Hume male was closing in right beside him.
"Uooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!"
He roared and raised his weapon.
Seeing that, but Kelmizo gave a small derisive laugh.
Good fighting spirit. But whether confused, reckless, or simply unable to think of anything else, what the male held was the scorched corpse of a Jubia.
Did he think he could do anything to Kelmizo by swinging something like this? Or did he think Kelmizo would flinch at this?
He lightly swept away whatever was coming with his left claw.
The next instant.
— Ggya!
At the searing pain, Kelmizo let out a scream.

— Now! —
Shin heard a voice in his head.
The Diva had turned toward Mei after knocking Shin away, tried to launch a spell-formula, and was blocked by her. It let out a voice of surprise and stopped moving.
He didn't quite understand it, but its spell had been blocked and it was thrown into disarray.
Then, using that weapon was only possible now.
Shin had kept the spell-formula sword tucked at his back, holding it behind himself, and wove the keyword in his mouth.
— Rene's extreme, Varta's extreme fitted in a spiral, become a blade of light to annihilate the Diva —
Vun.
A small vibration in his hand. A blade had presumably been born.
But even with the Diva's attention elsewhere right now, charging with a conspicuously glowing short sword in this darkness would get noticed no matter what.
So then —
Without even needing to look around, right nearby, there was a single scorched Jubia corpse lying there.

"—Take this!"
Shin drew the spell-formula sword. Keeping the left one gripped behind him, he plunged the light blade in his right hand to the hilt into the blackened Jubia corpse lying there.
He gripped the handle and the Jubia's leg together, rose and swung up.
The Diva sensed the presence and turned around. The glowing blade should be hidden in the Jubia's flesh and invisible.
"Uooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!"
He roared and swung the "weapon."
Seeing that, the Diva smiled slightly — or seemed to.
He swung the "weapon." The Diva, with a movement of utter contempt, gave the Jubia corpse a light sweep of its claw.
The corpse took the claw, ripped apart and flew —
But the gleaming blade hidden within it was exposed and raked across the Diva's hooked claw and hand!
— Ggya!
Letting out a groan of pain, it withdrew its hand and jumped backward. Of course this was far from a fatal blow, but the opponent had been destabilized.
Not wasting this chance, Shin threw the spell-formula sword in his left hand toward the Diva's chest!
The Diva leaned back and barely managed to dodge the blow. But this completely broke its balance.
Now or never.
No time to close in and press the advantage. Then.
Shin threw the one blade remaining in his right hand at the Diva's back!
The light tore through the Diva's skin!
GiYu, gouu, ooooooooo!
A scream that could only belong to a beast shook the air.
The massive body lurched to one side —

It held its ground.
……huu……huu……huu……huu……
The Diva breathed with its shoulders and — turned back toward Shin.
At its feet lay the half of the spell-formula sword, still producing its modest blade of light. The other half, which had been thrown and missed, was nowhere to be seen.
The Diva's left black wing membrane was greatly torn.
The price paid for swatting away that final throw.
Was this the reason the blade was called the Blade to Annihilate Divas? The torn wound was oozing and melting, slowly spreading and consuming the surrounding area.

"What is this!? What is this!?"
With a roar of rage.
Juri!
The Diva used its right claw to gouge and tear away that wound — the area around the wing membrane — stopping the wound's spread.
Behind it — at the edge of his vision, he saw Mei raise her right hand.
The spell ring glowed and a blaze shot toward the Diva.
But.
Rua!
Along with the Diva's roar, a black shield created in the void sent Mei's released flame scattering.
She only had one type of offensive spell ring. If it was known that flames were coming, blocking them was probably not particularly difficult. For a Diva.
The still-surviving Jubias surged toward Mei. She was occupied dealing with them.
In the meantime, the Diva tore off its left gauntlet.
From within, the left hand it revealed had lost one claw, the flesh of its hand also torn.
Whether it was the spell-formula sword's power again, the wound there, like the wing, was slowly consuming and spreading into the surrounding flesh.
The Diva did not hesitate, swinging its right claw —
Djubu!
Just like the wing, it gouged and threw away the wound along with the surrounding flesh.
It didn't let out a single scream, but there was surely pain. The shaking shoulders. The creaking of clenched fangs spoke to that.
Shin — couldn't move.
Receiving the Diva's killing intent full on.
Until now —
The Diva had never directed killing intent at Shin. He understood that for the first time now.
Having thought the Diva had directed killing intent at him on that foggy night when it was facing Mei — that had been a tremendous misunderstanding. Something like that hadn't been killing intent at all. Probably — it had been something like: "you're in the way."
What Shin was feeling now was incomparable to such a thing. The marrow of his spine was dreadfully cold. At the core of his head, a burning, freezing sensation.
He couldn't even move his body. No, the will to move didn't even well up.
"……I see. So this is the trump card."
The Diva said in a quiet voice, and using a right-hand claw, picked up the half of the spell-formula sword fallen at its feet, and stared at the light blade.

Even with its gaze elsewhere, the killing intent was still capturing Shin.
"A toy I've never seen, but……so one should not underestimate Humes, is that it."
The gaze returned. Toward Shin. Slowly, drawing closer.
"That was quite painful."
"— What are you doing! Run!"
Burning a Jubia with flame, Mei raised something close to a scream. Hearing it, Shin finally came back to himself.
But by then.
"You try it too."
The Diva's arm extended without care.
Ton.
A light impact on his right chest.
At the same time, a heavy numbness running through his body.
Looking down, the handle of the spell-formula sword the Diva held was pressed against his right chest.
The not-so-long blade of light was barely peeking its tip from Shin's back.
"Shiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiin!"
Mei's scream.
He understood.
That his chest had been run through.
His vision tilted, fading —

Shin fell.
With a sound.
Mei drew a small sharp breath.
Shin didn't move.
She understood what had happened.
Before the motionless Shin, the shadow of the Diva standing.
The Diva was watching.
Herself.
Déjà vu.
She felt like she had seen a scene similar to this sometime. Felt like she had experienced a feeling similar to this sometime.
But she couldn't remember when, or where it had been.
"He should still be alive."
The Diva said. Toward Mei.
"Just barely missed the vital spot.

A wound that won't allow movement, but if you take him to a doctor right now, perhaps he could be saved."
She understood what it was trying to say.
If Mei fled now, Shin would certainly not be saved. In other words: don't flee.
— But too bad. I'm a villain, you know. Abandoning an underling is just one more form of entertainment!
She tried to throw out a one-liner like that and dash away as an act of spite, but what came from her mouth was only a ragged breath. Her feet didn't move from the spot either.
Was her throat burning dry because she'd been shouting? From the looks of it.
— I am a villain. No, I must be a villain.
In Mei's chest, for reasons she didn't understand, that thought strongly resided.
What was lying knocked down over there was just underling number two. Who showed insufficient respect to herself whom he should be serving, was blunt, wasn't generous. For someone who acted high-and-mighty, when push came to shove he was rather unreliable — or even, depending on the case, a drag on things.
Above all, compared to underling number one — on permanent retired status — he was fatally lacking in anything like charm.
An utterly useless underling like this — in a situation like now, laughing with room to spare and abandoning them without a second thought was surely her duty as one who should be a villain.
But —
She couldn't do it. For some reason.
Was it because the food he'd cooked had been delicious? Was it because he'd given her the bed?
The reason, she didn't know.
But —
Mei gave a small wry smile.
"……ah, useless, this man……"
"Are you abandoning him!?"
At the Diva's voice containing an accusatory tone, Mei deepened her smile.
"I'm saying I'm going to have to be your opponent myself."
"……I see……"
The Diva cast aside the spell-formula sword half it wasn't accustomed to holding and turned to face her.
Honestly, Mei had no odds of winning.
She could probably escape.

Actually, the first several times when she had been attacked, she had used spell-formulas that were simple to her, blinded the Diva, and escaped. She could probably manage now too.
But that meant the death of a less-than-ideal underling.
If she didn't want that, the only option was to fight and win as quickly as possible — but.
Could she? Do something like that?
Thinking calmly, the answer was no.
What was available to her: flame attack using spell rings, and spell-formula neutralization.
With those moves already read, the flame attack would be blocked with a spell, and a direct physical confrontation would come.
Mei had no confidence whatsoever in fighting with a weapon in hand. She couldn't win even against the useless underling lying knocked out there, let alone a Diva.
The sole winning element was the possibility of drawing out that power as she had on the night two weeks ago — but she also didn't know how to make that happen.
The odds of winning were desperately thin. Her head understood that.
But for some reason, she didn't feel like she would lose either.
The Diva stepped toward Mei. The leisurely pace was not from composure — it was being wary of Mei's power.
The still-surviving Jubias surrounded them, as if watching how things would unfold.
— What to do —
Mei murmured in her chest —
Ka!
A brilliant light flashed, it was at that moment.
"Don't move!"
An unknown man's loud voice.
『— !?』
The Diva and Mei. Where both of them turned — under the brilliant illumination created by spell-formula, there were several men with swords drawn.
The several spell-driven automobiles stopped behind them bore the patrol squad's symbol mark.
Belatedly.
The patrol officers who had departed the station had finally arrived at the scene.

But.
In reality, the surprised ones were actually the patrol officers rather than Mei or the Diva.

Stopping the spell-driven automobiles a little away from the scene, deploying their personnel and drawing swords, ready to launch cold-air spell-formulas at any moment, they generated light as a warning. The standard procedure.
But their opponent was —
A girl and a strangely dressed large man.
That was how it looked in the faint lamplight.
But under the brilliant light created by the spell-formula, the patrol officers noticed that this had been an error.
Setting the girl aside — what they had thought was a strangely dressed large man was not human.
An inhuman massive body. Wings on its back.
"……what……is that……?"
An officer murmured in a hoarse voice.
The war had been over for fifty years. Of course none of the officers had actually seen one.
Even so, from record photographs. Or from paintings. Many knew and had seen their form.
Why something like that was in a place like this, no one could understand.
"……Di……Diva……?"
Someone murmured.
"That can't be……"
"……that's impossible……? Some kind of mistake……"
"What is this……what's going on……"
Agitation spread among the officers. The sword tips drawn toward the Diva and Mei wavered.
Shin had indeed reported it. That they had been attacked by a Diva.
But not a single patrol officer had taken that at face value. The existence of a Diva had been omitted in the middle as the information was relayed, and it hadn't even reached the officers gathered here.
Before their hearts could accept the situation.
— Ru, oo.
The Diva gave a small groan.
Using that as a signal.
GikiGiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!
The remaining Jubias simultaneously lunged at them all!
Screams arose.
Attacked by unknown beasts, the officers fell into panic. They swung their swords wildly and released cold-air spell-formulas.
The blood scattered in the wind — was it human blood? Jubia blood?

Even so, some of them launched spell-formulas at the Diva, but whether from hands trembling in panic, they simply froze the night wind uselessly without even requiring the Diva to dodge.
— Well, even if the spell meant to arrest humans had hit, how much damage it would have done to a Diva was highly dubious.
Steel and fangs flashed, screams of people and beasts mingled, utterly defiling the once-quiet night air.
In the panic, many patrol officers fell, and just as they somehow managed to finish off the majority of the Jubias —
Don!
The flames the Diva released swallowed up the badly battered patrol officers.
— In the end, not a single officer had the composure to use the defensive spell rings they'd been equipped with.

Flames rose at the edge of Mei's vision.
Swallowing the screams and the patrol officers and the Jubias.
The Diva had fired spell-formulas in rapid succession three times — at Mei, at the patrol officers, and then Mei again.
Presumably anticipating that if it attacked only the patrol officers, Mei would neutralize or interfere with them.
……Actually, what Mei could neutralize was only spells within her own reach.
And Mei had had no reason, no face to put to them, and no way of knowing how useful those people would be — she had had no intention of backing them up.
They had been caught completely off guard and yet simply panicking at the sight of the Diva, and on top of that falling into panic when attacked by the Jubias.
……Come to think of it, underling number two had been like that at first too.
In any case, Mei had only neutralized and offset the spell-formulas directed at herself.
The unreliable rescue was gone, but the annoying Jubias were also gone with it. Well, in that sense, whatever they were, the patrol squad had been somewhat useful.
The problem was what to do about the remaining Diva.
The Diva ran toward Mei again. Mei turned and ran sideways.
"Running away!"
Along with the voice, wind and a presence closed in from behind. Collapsing forward, she bent low —
When she rose turning around at the same time. In Mei's hand was a sword that one of the patrol officers had dropped.
She stroked the spell ring on the guard once around. She released cold air at the closing Diva!

"— !"
Apparently this had been outside its calculations even if it was prepared for flames.
Apparently judging that a spell response wouldn't make it in time, the Diva threw off its balance but managed to dodge.
The cold air just grazed the wounded left wing and instantly froze part of it.
Mei didn't notice, but the cold air's power was significantly higher than when the patrol officer had used it.
She aimed a second shot at the Diva whose balance had been broken in pursuit. But.
RiAa!
The shield the roaring Diva created effortlessly repelled the cold air.
Recovering its balance and turning back toward Mei.
"You!"
Mei pointed the tip of the sword in her right hand at the Diva, and again cold air — or as a feint, fired flames from the bracelet.
The spell-formula structure of a cold-blocking shield and a flame-blocking shield were different. If the other side read it wrong, the match would be settled — or so it should have been.
But the shield the Diva's spell created knocked away the released flames.
— Wow. It read me! —
Mei fuming inwardly.
The Diva kicked off and closed in on Mei. Mei met it with a string of spell-formulas.
Flame. Cold. Cold. Cold. Flame. Flame.
Every single one she released was blocked by the Diva's generated shield.
— They're all being read! Why!? —
Whether she was concerned about Shin or simply not paying attention. Mei hadn't even noticed the fact that depending on which — the bracelet or the sword guard — glowed with which spell ring, it was easy to tell whether what was coming was flame or cold.
The Diva closed in all at once —
Suddenly.
— Vararararararararararararara!
Gi!?
Hit across its whole body by a rain of light coming from the side, it screamed and was blown flying!
"!?"
The place Mei turned in surprise.
"……it seems I was a little late."
Lezerd's voice was empty of any emotion.

Shin lying face down, not moving.
One half of the spell-formula sword rolling beside him.
The patrol officers and Jubias collapsed together. Among the officers, those still alive were sending their groans echoing.
The Diva that had been blown flying and fallen from a surprise attack.
Only Mei and Lezerd were standing. Even the onlookers who had been there until just moments ago had apparently felt danger and hidden themselves somewhere.
"Too late."
Throwing in a disgruntled comment, she turned toward Lezerd —
"Not yet."
He said it and looked toward the fallen Diva.
Slowly.
The massive body rose to its feet where it was.
The right wing was in tatters.
Black blood flowing from countless wounds on the right leg.
Injured all over its body, and yet the Diva stood with fighting spirit burning.
"Mei! Together!"
"Got it!"
Sensing Lezerd's intent, Mei pointed her right hand at the Diva. Two types of spell being blocked simultaneously should be impossible even for a Diva. And with that wing and foot, even fleeing should be difficult.
Lezerd's growl and Mei's spirit overlapped.
The born light and flame closed in on the Diva from two directions —
RigiUu!
The light was blocked by the shield created by spell-formula.
At the same time the Diva picked up a nearby Jubia corpse and threw it at the flames!
Bau!
Intercepted, the scattered flames burned the night.
In that interval the Diva leaped. Showing jumping power unimaginable for a wounded creature, it crouched to land among the fallen patrol officers —
And when it rose, each hand gripped a sword from one of the patrol officers.
Ruguraaaaaaaaaaaaa!
At the same time as roaring, both hands' claws traced the spell rings.
『— What!?』
Mei and Lezerd's voices overlapped.
One streak of cold aimed at Mei, another at Lezerd sped —
Bachi!
A light spell ring born in the sky discharged lightning toward the earth!
With Lezerd's body between it.

A simultaneous triple offensive spell-formula combining spell ring and spell words.
It launched two shots to take down Lezerd first. And one feint at Mei.
Lezerd's body gave a great convulsive jerk in a voiceless scream! The cold air was closing in!
Without the lightning, Lezerd could have dodged or blocked with a spell. But.
Rumble!
Struck by a freezing gale, Lezerd toppled backward to the earth.
"……ugh……ugh……!"
A small groan. His hands and feet moved slightly.
He was still breathing.
How he was still alive after receiving that attack — whether it was because the power of each individual shot was weakened by the simultaneous activation, or because he was a Draguno.
Even so, the lightning had paralyzed the nerves throughout his body, and the cold air had plastered frost across his entire form. He was not in any state to fight, let alone even move properly.
With this, the only one who could still move properly was Mei, who had dodged that cold air.
RuGiiii!
Roaring, the Diva launched the triple attack again, this time all aimed at Mei alone. But.
Mei moved barely half a step, raised her left hand to the side.
"Negative Terra."
Two streams of cold air passed by Mei by paper-thin margins, and the one remaining shot was neutralized by her technique before it could activate.
"— Just as I thought —"
Pain was thick in the Diva's voice. The wounds it had suffered were by no means light. But its tone had composure.
"……you……can see the spell-formulas……how and what kind of spell is activated……"
"So what?"
Said as if it were the most natural thing in the world, the Diva was taken aback. A wry smile at the corner of its mouth.
"— But — right now, you cannot use the kind of power you used that day. Is that right."
"……!……"
Baited, Mei drew a small sharp breath. It was the same as confirming it.
"……also, this too, is as expected……"
At the same moment as the Diva murmured that, Mei kicked off the ground.
The destination was not the Diva. The target was the spell-formula sword rolling beside the fallen Shin.

But there was no way the Diva would let such an obvious movement pass. With its astonishing jumping power even with its injuries, it cut in between Mei and the rolling sword.
"……and you don't appear to be skilled in combat either."
The Diva spread its right hand wide to the side in a stance —
— !?
Whatever it sensed, as if struck it sprang sideways turning around at the same time.
But its reaction was slightly delayed.
Ga!?
A light raking its left hand as it swept through the void, and the sword in that hand fell from its grasp.
"— You!?"
The stunned gaze the Diva directed.
There stood Shin, spell-formula sword in hand.

"……you were alive……"
"I thought I was dead. Me too."
With that, Shin, spell-formula sword in his right hand, walked toward the Diva without ceremony.
The stabbed chest didn't hurt.
He didn't understand.
Why he was unhurt. What had happened while he was unconscious.
When he came to, he noticed that he was lying on the ground, and before him he could see the glowing spell-formula sword and the back of the Diva facing Mei.
He hadn't understood the circumstances, but he understood that the Diva — covered in wounds — still hadn't given up its will and strength to fight.
Then what he had to do was decided.
He rose and picked up the spell-formula sword at the same time, and made his move.
But the surprise attack that should have been a surprise was apparently sensed — by killing intent, or by the sword's light. It dodged, ending in merely knocking away the sword in one hand.
Fear was gone now. His body moved.
He could still feel the Diva's killing intent, but it no longer froze the core of his body.
Had the resolve — or resignation — come over him once he had thought he was already dead?
The reason was, well, whatever it was.
What mattered was —
I can fight now.

That — fact.
"Hey!"
"Keep out of it."
Unnecessary interference would only endanger him.
He said it to Mei without even looking at her —
He moved.
The Diva swung its right-hand sword. The reach disadvantage was against Shin. But whether because it was unaccustomed to a sword, or from its wounds, its movements felt noticeably slower than before.
He stopped his feet just at the edge of the range for an instant, let the sword wind pass —
Shin stepped in one more step.

Pressure is fatal in battle.
Kelmizo knew that well enough. But —
— Why —!?
Why was this Hume, who should have had his chest run through, coming at Kelmizo again with that strange glowing knife?
Could this one too, like that female, be no ordinary Hume? Had the wound already healed?
Desperately suppressing his inner agitation, he focused his attention on the opponent before him — and on the blade of light.
He couldn't receive that with his claw. Earlier when he'd used his left hand to swipe it away, for some reason the gauntlet had been undamaged while the blade had wounded his left hand.
Of course the Hume's sword couldn't serve as a shield either. But there was a reach advantage.
In other words — he just needed to not let the Hume get close.
But.
Easily reading the feinting swing, the Hume came pressing into his reach.
The blade swung back upward — the Hume crouched under it and came in another step.
— This is bad —
Whether from the unfamiliar weapon in hand called a sword, or from the wounds all over his body, he was losing slightly in speed.
He stepped back half a step and spat compressed spell words from the back of his throat.
RaaUu!

But before Kelmizo's throat even finished.
The Hume's form vanished from Kelmizo's field of view.
— !
Sensing wind and presence, Kelmizo moved left.
Light sped, grazing his wing. The Hume had sensed that Kelmizo was about to use a spell-formula and instantly moved sideways.
Kelmizo's released spell-formula did nothing but shake the empty air.
— This one — !
Kelmizo understood. His own mistaken assumption.
An unfamiliar weapon, the Hume's sword. His own wounds.
But the reason Kelmizo was losing in speed — was not only those.
The warrior before him was growing.
The Hume before him. Right now. Within this brief battle.

He could see the Diva's throat vibrating.
A spell-formula was coming.
Sensing it, Shin circled around to the Diva's right and swung the spell-formula sword.
The Diva sensed it too and dodged. The blade only shallowly grazed the wing.
The Diva's released spell-formula could be sensed crackling beside him.
Paying no heed, Shin pulled back his arm and stepped in further, thrusting the blade.
Somehow, he felt like he was getting a sense of how to handle this weapon. Given the short reach, make up for it with number of moves. Not slashing but a sense of thrusting while turning the wrist. A knack he couldn't have grasped in practice alone.
The Diva swung its sword trying not to let Shin get close. Slow.
He stepped back half a step to avoid the tip, stepped in again, aimed for the arm gripping the sword.
The Diva reversed its sword at the last instant.
The flat of the sword and the handle of the spell-formula sword scraped together, making a small hard sound.

Being pushed.
Himself.
Kelmizo had no choice but to acknowledge that.
Just a powerless Hume male.
He had perceived the opponent before him that way. He had actually been like that two weeks ago.
But now —

With the aid of an unfamiliar weapon, against himself who was wounded — even accounting for all that, he was showing ability worthy of astonishment.
……No.
Wrong.
An unfamiliar weapon.
His own wounds.
Those things didn't matter.
Just a Hume. That thinking had been wrong.
What he was facing right now was a single warrior.
An opponent who could not be handled with a borrowed Hume sword as a makeshift measure. Nor an opponent who could be defeated by fearing to be wounded.
An enemy to be defeated, staking pride in his own claws.
— Kelmizo leaped far backward and put distance between them.

They faced each other.
One Diva and one Hume.
"My name is Kelmizo."
The Diva said.
"Shin. Shindred Kairam."
The Hume said.
Having exchanged names, both of them kicked off the ground simultaneously.
Kelmizo's throat vibrated. Paying no heed, Shin charged straight through.
The spell-formula launched anticipating that Shin would dodge did nothing but bite through the night wind.
Just at the instant before coming into range. Kelmizo raised the sword and threw it straight at Shin!
A throw from close range. But Shin dodged as if he had already read it, letting his left side flow to the side.
He entered range. The glowing blade in Shin's right hand was thrust forward.
Kelmizo parried it with his left hand. His fingers and claws were gouged, but being wounded was something he was prepared for.
At the same time Kelmizo himself stepped in one step and gouge-drove his right claw into Shin as if wrapping around him!
The sound of steel — parting wet flesh.
Both of their movements stopped for an instant.
— Kahu…!
The one who leaked that breath — was Kelmizo.

The steel blade in Shin's hand had pierced through the gap in the leather armor and driven into Kelmizo's abdomen.
Kelmizo's right claw that had gouge-driven in — had been stopped by the pommel of that sword.
The patrol squad's sword that Kelmizo had thrown at Shin.
Shin had not merely dodged that throw — he had caught it in his left hand and made it his own blade.
……ugh……
Kelmizo's left claw moved —
But before that could flip around.
Shin's finger was tracing the spell ring engraved in the sword's guard.
Go!
Cold air was born inside the body, and Kelmizo's body gave a great shudder. Toppling backward —
……doza……
Kelmizo fell to the earth.
— In the night sky he looked up at, five moons were shining —
The tip of his wing trembled slightly.
Kelmizo somehow raised his head and looked toward Shin. The corner of his mouth curved slightly —
The head dropped.
Shin understood.
In the end — Kelmizo, for some reason, had smiled.

Before Shin standing and looking down, the Diva no longer moved.
The battle — was over.
How long had he stood there?
"— Amazing!"
Mei's voice, completely shredding the tense atmosphere, made Shin turn his face that way.
She let out a breath, her shoulders dropping heavily, and tossed away the sword she'd been holding.
It was the same tone as always, but perhaps even she had been tense in her own way.
……But……
Coming back to himself, Shin looked all around.
"……you know……isn't this kind of a mess? All of this?"

Hit by the crossfire of spell-formula exchanges, the surrounding garden trees and hedges were in ruins. There and here flames were rising, and a short distance away the patrol officers were charred and groaning.
Mei didn't seem particularly bothered, and walking toward him, she glanced around briefly.
"Let's call it a pleasant dose of spice for daily life?"
"That's way too much spice."
"— Never mind that, are you all right? Your chest?"
At Mei's question, Shin directed a teasing smile at her.
"Worried? About me?"
"What'd you...!? What...! For what reason...!
I'm the one who...! I mean...!"
She started floundering in some kind of confusion. She seemed to be embarrassed.
Shin looked back and forth between his own unscathed chest and the remaining half of the spell-formula sword in his right hand.
".....right.....I definitely had this driven through me to the hilt, didn't I....."
The other half, which had flown off when he'd thrown it, was nowhere to be found. He'd have to look for it later or things would be bad.
"I felt the stabbing sensation and the impact, but....."
".....so.....you were actually stabbed....."
A weak voice that arose was familiar.
Looking that way — still covered in frost from head to toe where he'd fallen, yet somehow only raising his head to look their way — was Lezerd.
"Lezerd!?"
Shin exclaimed in surprise.
"You were there!?"
At that all-too-cavalier greeting, Lezerd's raised head dropped with a clunk.
"He was, actually."
Mei offered from the side as commentary.
"He came in from the side and hit the Diva with a surprise attack, but got easily knocked down right after.
Wow, that spectacular one-trick act, I'd like to make it a seasonal tradition. What a shame you didn't see it."
"Is that all it was."
".....sorry about that.....a one-trick act at that....."
Grumbling in a sulky tone, but even so Lezerd collected himself.
".....I told you.....the spell-formula sword.....destroys Diva blood.....it's a weapon for use against Divas....."
".....meaning....."

"……it's harmless to anything other than Divas."
『……』
Shin and Mei fell silent. Lezerd continued, still lying down.
"……isn't it obvious……I told you I received it from a friend as a good-luck charm……
Like……something that cuts through anything……indiscriminately dangerous……you couldn't just give something like that to someone……or bring it as a carry-on to study abroad……
The reason I gave it to you, Shindred, was precisely because it's harmless to other things……
Did you not notice while using it……?"
"……well…… about that……"
Shin dodged the answer.
As a matter of fact, in the course of daily training, Shin had not used the spell-formula sword at all.
There was the issue of it being noticed by the watching patrol officers, and on top of that, every time he saw the blades that weren't particularly large, he was reminded of the smallness of his own magical power — no, the limit of their species called Humes — and he didn't like that.
Naturally, having never tried test cuts, he apparently hadn't noticed because of that.
"w……wait a moment."
Mei said.
"If it's harmless……
Then the reason this underling number two collapsed was……"
The color of a wry smile entered Lezerd's voice.
"……well……
Being stabbed would give you quite a shock, I'd imagine……
Thinking he'd been killed, he fainted from the shock, couldn't that be it……?"
"He's so embarrassingly uncool!"
"Hey wait! Don't say uncool!
The finale was me! It was!"
"'I suppose.'"
"Don't say 'I suppose' either!
……well, whatever……
At any rate, this is settled for now……
Then what comes next……"
He exhaled the words with a sigh, and Shin sent his tired gaze that way.
Following suit, Mei looked the same way.
Bathed in both their gazes.
Shin's house was burning with impressive energy.

"……my house……"
"It's mine."
Mei's murmur was immediately corrected by Shin.

"Seriously though. You really had it rough, Loli Loli Sorcerer King."
"And I keep telling you to stop calling me that."
Walking to school after several days' absence.
While Shin was out of school for the interviews and other matters, the rumor about the commotion had apparently already spread everywhere, and he was promptly caught by gossip-lover Mark and approached with that opening.
Mark came close to Shin and lowered his voice.
"— So. What's the real story?"
"She and I don't have that kind of relationship."
"No, not that. The incident with the Diva.
The instructors were saying 'you were just unlucky to get caught up in it,' and the patrol squad's official announcement didn't say anything but……
What really happened? Wasn't that Mei girl involved?"
"……that's hard to say……"
Walking down the commercial street together, Shin furrowed his brow.
"I think it's certain that she was being targeted, but as for why……
It's not like the other side kindly gave an explanation."
In the end Kelmizo had died without saying anything. Had everything ended with this? Or had something begun? Right now Shin had no way to know.
"What's the story going around at school?"
"Well, there's all kinds of embellishments."
Mark shrugged at the question.
"What the instructors said was, a Diva went on a rampage in the city, and you and the exchange student got caught up in it……that's about all we got.
And on top of that, everyone's arbitrary imagination added itself — the Diva was targeting the exchange student……actually calling him that will get the man himself annoyed again……that Lezerd, or, you and Lezerd and the Diva fought over a girl and it turned into a commotion, or you transformed into a Diva and went on a rampage."
"Why would that happen."
"How should I know, it's a rumor. Don't glare at me.
The official announcement has it that the patrol squad is the one who took down the Diva, but there's also rumors going around that it was Lezerd, or that they actually didn't finish it and are covering it up by saying they did because it was embarrassing……"

"……I see……"
Shin murmured half-heartedly.
There was no way anyone would believe him if he said the finishing blow was mine.
In fact, when he had said so during the patrol squad's questioning, as expected, no one believed him at all.
To wit: "if you're a youngster who could take down a Diva, there's no way so many of our officers would have been killed."
……Well, he couldn't say he didn't understand their wanting to say that, having lost their colleagues.
Since they flatly refused to believe him, Shin eventually got fed up and lied, saying Lezerd had done it, and threatened them that making a careless announcement would make it an international incident.
Immediately the questioning officers grew mealy-mouthed, something to behold.
In the end, the official announcement glossed it over as a nameless patrol officer who risked their life to take it down — apparently.
"So which is it, Shin. Who was the one who actually killed the Diva?"
"Kelm……there's no doubt that the Diva fell, but……I was unconscious for a while in the middle."
"What. You don't know?"
Mark made an arbitrary misunderstanding and looked disappointed.
Well, letting the misunderstanding stand here was probably for the best.
"Then maybe Lezerd knows."
"Could be.
Though with those injuries he won't be coming to the training school for a while."
"Really?"
"Yeah. I heard it's not life-threatening though."
"……hmm……
Come to think of it, Shin, you were pretty lucky.
To have been at the scene, and still be totally fine without a scratch like this.
When so many patrol officers were killed, too……
Oh right, the Lord Mayor here apparently collapsed the moment he heard the report of the incident, and has been bedridden ever since."
"Whatever about the patrol officers……the Lord Mayor thing is just too pathetic."
"Well, you could say that."
From somewhere, both of them looked toward the white official residence on the hillside.
"It's true I wasn't hurt, but the house burned down.
The fire department worked hard, so it didn't burn down beyond the point of being livable, but the furniture is basically a total loss.

The repair costs and everything hurt.
If I was really lucky, I wouldn't have gotten caught up in this incident in the first place."
"True enough. Hahaha."
"Don't 'hahaha' me."
Talking like that as they walked.
"— Shindred!"
He was called from the side when they were near the training school.
Looking, a classmate was running toward him from along the street.
For Shin, someone he knew the name of but had rarely spoken with — that level of acquaintance, but looking at the eyes that made no effort to hide curiosity, why they had gone out of their way to call out was obvious without asking.
He came up close, excitedly saying:
"You look well. Everyone was genuinely worried, you know.
The exchange student and…… what was it……right, your Loli Loli Queen was caught up in it too, right? Is she okay?"
"Haha haha haha."
Without hesitation, Shin twisted the classmate's collar, and in a gentle tone asked:
"So, Mark, I want to ask you, just what kind of rumors have you been spreading to everyone while I wasn't around?"

『……Meaning that Hume……this time showed no power whatsoever?』
"Yes."
To Elder Dragon-sama's question echoing from the mirror, Lezerd returned a confirmatory answer.
The assigned special room. Rest for recovery was certainly necessary, but when he couldn't sleep, he found himself with time on his hands.
Using that time, he was making his report to his homeland.
"The Humes announced officially that the patrol squad — their own self-defense organization — took down the Diva. It seems they want to keep my involvement as a foreigner hidden.
Well, presumably they want to prevent the incident from becoming an international issue."
『Telling a trivial lie that will soon unravel……is this what they call self-preservation.
Well, I suppose that's fitting for Humes.』
"Certainly in my observation there are many trivial Humes, but occasionally there are interesting Humes."

『That Hume with the strange power……this Mei person? But that is……』

"Also, the Hume male who took down the Diva. Shindred Kairam."
『You lent him the spell-formula sword, didn't you?』
"A Diva is not an opponent that can be beaten with the power of a tool alone."
『……Hmm……』
The mirror stopped rippling for a moment, silent —
『If there is an opportunity I would like to meet them. Those Humes.
Those two — no, even just the woman — would you be able to bring her here?』
It took the form of a question, but was in substance close to a command. But Lezerd offhandedly said:
"Even if I suggested it, they wouldn't go along right now.
I can't cause problems by doing anything forceful.
— However —』
『……However?』
"How the Diva will move from here. And how the situation will change based on that.
Regarding that possibility……for now, I cannot say."
『……I see……
Then perhaps it is also interesting to wait patiently for a while.』
"I think so too."
『Understood.
If anything happens, let me know.
Until then, take good care of yourself.
— May blessings be upon your scales —』
"— May blessings — be upon you —"
Leaving its voice, the mirror quieted.
After, there was just the one Lezerd standing alone in the room, bandages wrapped here and there.

This time.
The Diva who had caused the incident had lost his father — in the fighting against Humes — in the war fifty years ago.
It was presumably due to harboring resentment over that, and developing antipathy toward recent inter-nation exchange, that he turned to terrorism against Humes.
It was several more days after that when Burgiolas, Foreign Affairs Minister of the Diva, made that official announcement concerning the incident.
To Shin and Lezerd it sounded like a made-up story, but there was no basis or evidence to deny it.
And Mei —

"— I'm home~"
"Welcome……ho~"
Basabasabasabasa.
Seeing Mei come running out tottering into the hallway, Shin couldn't help being at a loss for words.
He pressed his fingers to his brow for a moment.
"……ah……where to begin objecting is a slight puzzle, but let's go in order.
Why are you already home?"
After the Diva attack incident, Mei was still listlessly settled in at Shin's house.
Shin had by now completely lost the chance to throw her out — but even so, living costs would simply double, and there was also the matter of the house repair costs.
If she was going to stay and sleep in the bed and eat properly, get a job, Shin had insisted over and over, and just yesterday Mei had finally found a part-time waitressing job.
By rights, it should still be work hours — but.
"Um……so……during the shift……a rude customer……ow……grabbed my butt……"
Basabasa basabasa.
"Grabbed your butt? So you punched the customer?"
"No way……ow……I calmly……ouch……as a fair reward……tried to request an amount sufficient to renovate this house……"
"Don't be unreasonable."
"The customer……said the same thing……so to proceed with……the collection……I tried a little knee kick to the face……and the manager……"
"Got angry and declared you fired?"
"Nope. He tried to stop me……ouch! So for the unavoidable continuation of the collection mission……owtch! I felt compelled to subdue him with a chair……!"
"And you got fired."
"Right. A microcosm……of a twisted social structure……ow ow ow!
So……as even minimal labor compensation……I came home still wearing the uniform……"
"Ah. So that's why you're in a waitress outfit."
"Exactly……"
Basabasabasabasa.
"And by any chance, the clothes you wore in wouldn't be the kind of anticlimactic ending where you left them in the locker at work, would it?"
"Oh."
That anticlimactic ending seemed to be the case.
Shin gave a small sigh.

"……I see……well……that's……not good, but……let's say it's fine for now.
— So?"
Shin pointed at Mei's shoulder.
"What is that?"
The indicated spot — on Mei's right shoulder, tied by a string around the feet, was a single violently struggling white pigeon.
"Former part-time job……ow ow! Behind the back of the place……! Had a fateful encounter……! Underling number one! I've tried naming it……Rasil Fractal……and……uute te te!
"Ah. Right."
Shin responded in a bored tone.
For some reason he had an urge to warmly watch how long Mei would keep enduring the pigeon's beak and wing attacks, but he also didn't want the hallway he'd just cleaned and repainted to be fouled.
"……wasn't 'underling one' a permanently retired number?"
He tried asking about something unrelated.
"……the remarkably impressive……way it ate the bread scraps……moved my heart……tete te! And I tried……re-activating……the position!"
"……just take the string off the feet and let it go. It's been fighting and struggling madly this whole time."
"What are you saying……ow ow! This is one kind of……uppu! Expression of affection……you might say……tatata! Skin……my temple is my temple! Ears too! Ears too!"
Shin gave one sigh, came over, and untied the string binding the pigeon's feet for it.
Whether it understood that he was setting it free — or probably not — for some reason the pigeon didn't attack Shin's side.
As soon as the string was untied, underling number one whose appeal was the impressive bread-eating dashed out through the still-open front door without hesitation.
Mei held her head, sending a resentful look toward Shin.
"……ugh……if you were going to make a comment anyway, couldn't you have commented on underling number one before the part-time job?
You're not very perceptive, honestly……"
"I mean, were you actually finding it hard in there?"
He said it and Shin suddenly thought of something.
"By any chance you……
Just said 'fired' and thought I'd get angry, so to cover it up you brought underling number one…… something like that?"
"……wh……! Not……

There's nooooo way! Why would I……! Why do I have to care about your face of all people……! As a mere underling number two……!"

"Why……because you're a freeloader."
"That's wrong! The reason I scouted underling number one is exactly what I said before! ……but even so……"
She murmured and deliberately, in an obvious way, turned toward where underling number one had flown away — toward the front door.
"That rebellious spirit, thoroughly defying this very me despite being an underling……truly villainous and magnificent!
So I celebrate that villainy with 'underling number one' returning once again to permanent retirement."
"Right, right."
"Ugh, you brushed right past that, it's infuriating!"
Shin closed the front door, and Mei got flustered and came at him in full indignation.
As always, Mei's words and actions made no sense.
But —
Having a house where a voice said "welcome home" when he came through the door wasn't all that bad, Shin thought.

Afterword:

An Object Claiming to Be an Afterword

The sound of a shamisen echoes in the distance in the darkness.
The season of appreciating insect songs has passed, and the scent of winter has seeped thickly into the night wind.
A teahouse in a corner of Kojimachi in Edo. In its back parlor alone, the light of a paper lantern glowed faintly through the shoji screens.
Only two men were exchanging cups of sake in that room. One was an older merchant-type. The other was a middle-aged man dressed as a samurai.
At the merchant's urging, the samurai drained the sake-filled lacquered cup in one breath, then openly showed his ill-temper and grumbled.
"Tajimaya. On this cold night, deliberately summoning me to a place like this, with no beauties and no good food — how thoughtless of you."
The merchant prostrated himself in a bow of apology.
"Not at all, for the worthy Sakazaki-sama who has always done us such great favors, this Tajimaya would never commit such rudeness.
Beauties and savory accompaniments, the arrangements have long since been made.
But today, before that, there is a matter I wished to bring to Sakazaki-sama's ears, so first of all, that."
"Oh. A matter, you say."
The samurai drained the lacquered cup with a look of reluctance.
The merchant slid across the tatami and drew closer to the samurai, then lowered his voice with meaningful gravity.
"As a matter of fact."
Djidji, the lantern's wick crackled.
"I have heard that Kanzaka Hajime has put out a novel in a new series."
"What."
The samurai raised his eyebrows. Whether his color had changed was perhaps just the light.

He drew up his knee and leaned forward.
"When you say Kanzaka — that Kanzaka Hajime who, having been drawn in by the Sekai Meisaku Maru gacha series, tried to use it, but ended up jamming coins into it?"
"Indeed, sir. Being too embarrassed to say it to the shop staff, he fled as he was — that Kanzaka Hajime, it is."
"That is a grave matter. You did well to report it.
So, the title of this series?"
"I believe it was something called 'Kurosukadea,' or something of that nature."
"'Kurrosu'..... is it. So, the origin of that?"
"Well. As I only heard it from a shop assistant this evening, I cannot say for certain, but the 'kurosu' in 'kurosukadea' would be 'black vinegar,' I imagine."
"So his fondness for cooking has grown to the point where he has begun a story about a vinegar-brewer?"
The samurai laughed through his nose and sat himself back down with a thump, holding out the lacquered cup.
But the merchant, filling it with sake, had an unclouded face as he said:
"However, Sakazaki-sama, it seems that is not all."
"And you mean?"
"From what I heard from the shop assistant, the story involves a townsman called Shin or some such, and a niece comes to stay with him and makes herself at home."
"What. A niece makes herself at home, you say?"
The samurai inadvertently raised his voice.
"Then that would fall under the category of the 'moe' line that the authorities have been encouraging lately."
"It does seem that way, sir.
Furthermore, on top of that, a man called 'deba' comes to interfere, or so I hear."
"A 'deba' man."
The samurai frowned and drew back.
"Does that mean a man with protruding teeth, or does it mean a man carrying a deba kitchen knife?"
The merchant stopped his hand holding the flask and tilted his head.
"Well, now that you put it that way.
I had taken it for granted to mean a 'Debagame' peeping-tom man. This will have to be pressed more carefully from the shop assistant for clarification, I'm afraid."
"I rely on you urgently, Tajimaya.
But in any case, it is certain that it's a story about a niece or some female relative moving in with a vinegar-brewer and an unpleasant man coming to interfere?"
"Yes. That much, without a doubt."
"Whatever it may be, it sounds like an unimaginably dull story."

"Quite so, sir.
The one thing that concerns me is that, from the story as told, for an author who loves monsters and goblins as that one does, it seems there is no scene for the monsters and goblins to shine.
It could never in a million years be that we are misreading the story's outline, but then if that is the case —"
"Wait."
The samurai stopped the merchant's words and reached for his sword, stood up with an unusual air, walked to the shoji screen, took it, and opened it in one clean sweep.
But beyond was only cold darkness.
A night wind carrying the scent of winter slipped in softly.
The samurai gave one shudder, and closed the shoji screens.
"What was the matter?"
The merchant asked, and the samurai slowly shook his head.
"No. It was a fanciful imagining. I thought for certain I sensed the presence of something."
"You must be worked up because of what we've been speaking of."
"Perhaps so."
The samurai faced the merchant once more, sat properly, and placed his sword beside himself.
"Incidentally, Tajimaya. I have something I would like to put frankly to you."
"If it is something this Tajimaya is able to answer, by all means."
"Then I ask."
As if to sweep away the cold seeping in through the shoji screens, the samurai drained the lacquered cup.
"Is this truly a thing that can be called an afterword?"
"Hmm. That is a matter beyond this one's understanding, I'm afraid."
With that, the merchant bowed deeply.

The night grows ever deeper —

(Not to be continued in the following volume.)